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Codes of Conduct: Didacticism in the Works of Maria Edgeworth

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Abstract

To encounter the novels of Maria Edgeworth is to encounter an author who is not always politically correct. She did not write as a feminist to better the world for women. She did not write in the name of equality between nations or classes. She did not write to promote racial tolerance. In fact, based on her treatment of these issues within her novels, Edgeworth could arguably be accused of antifeminism, imperialism, and racism. Instead, what this late eighteenth-century, early nineteenth-century writer centered her novels around was a rigid set of moral guidelines. Maria Edgeworth used the novel genre as a way to promote her own codes of conduct that she perhaps thought necessary for a world caught in the midst of various upheavals. This thesis will investigate the possible events that may have inspired Edgeworth to take on the responsibility of moralizer. And of course, we will discuss the topics of education, class, gender, society, economy, fashion, and religion—all subjects which Edgeworth used to generate her codes of conduct. In a time of European unrest and change, Edgeworth, we will find, wrote to uphold the threatened status quo. In the shadows of women’s reform, the economic appearance of a middle class, and revolutions leading to the end of monarchies, Edgeworth took it upon herself to speak in opposition to these and other socially disruptive changes. This all seems happily uncomplicated until we consider Edgeworth’s use of textual rhetoric, the accents and dialogue of her characters, and her use of comedy which serve to undermine her moral motives. This thesis then must explore the ways in which Edgeworth inadvertently creates tension between the harmony she intends to accomplish through creating codes of conduct, and the discordant linguistic devices within her texts (rhetoric, accents, dialogue, idiom, sarcasm, irony, etc.) she employs to do so.
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Introduction

When Eras Collide

In a whirlwind of revolution, rebellion, and reform, the eighteenth century whirred and crashed its way into the subsequent years. The result of that collision was the nineteenth century—an age that would hardly recognize the previous one hundred years. The European Enlightenment that had been brewing for centuries came to a culmination in the seventeen hundreds when scientists such as Newton and Darwin and philosophes such as Voltaire, Diderot, Hume, Rousseau, and Kant questioned and changed the way in which humanity viewed and interpreted the world. A metamorphosis was taking place in the eighteenth century. It was an age whose thinkers would alter life for those peoples, parties, countries in power, the effects then rippling outward over the earth. The Enlightenment, or the “Age of Reason,” chastised the established schools of thought in regard to religion, politics, education, society, and the individual, which both directly and indirectly led to subsequent movements such as the Industrial Revolution, the French Revolution, the American Revolution, and the Irish Rebellion, to name only a few. The eighteenth century saw monarchies give way to parliaments, societies replaced by individuals, and superstitions quashed by science. Directly in the midst of this period of chaotic upheaval Maria Edgeworth lived, wrote, and made a name for herself. In 1767 Maria Edgeworth was born in Oxfordshire, England far from the family estate in Edgeworthstown, Ireland. She was part of the Anglo-Irish—a people whose name reveals their duality—and while Edgeworth certainly proves to be a woman as complex, as multi-faceted, and as radical as the era to which
she was born, she would spend her entire literary career swimming against these
currents of revolution and rebellion.

Maria Edgeworth’s life spans from 1767 to 1849, almost the exact time frame
which Eric Hobsbawm refers to as ‘the age of revolution.’¹ Hobsbawm’s research deals
mainly with the French and Industrial Revolutions and the intense changes which these
two events “brought within the countries most immediately affected by [them], and
within the rest of the world which was now thrown open to the full explosive impact of
the new forces” (4). The ‘new forces’ that exploded from these eighteenth- and
nineteenth-century events can be summarized in a list of words that were either
invented or at the very least “gained their modern meanings” during these eras:
‘proletariat’, among others (Hobsbawm 1). These words reveal the enormity of the
changes that occurred over a relatively short period. Moreover, Hobsbawm considers
these massive revolutions precursors to smaller ones which rippled throughout
Europe—such as the Irish Rebellion in 1798—and which marked “the disintegration of
the European revolutionary movement into national segments” (132). So not only did
these years see major revolutions, they in turn saw the rise of new vocabularies, the
creation of new nations, and the initiation of nationality. It is no wonder, then, that
Edgeworth’s fiction reflects at least some aspect of the chaos that ensued politically,
industrially, socially, morally, and economically in the eighteenth and nineteenth
centuries.

¹ Hobsbawm’s book, The Age of Revolution, covers the sixty-year period from 1789 until 1848—a period
completely contained within Edgeworth’s lifetime.
Considering the eras in which she lived, it may be tempting to refer to Edgeworth as a revolutionary woman writer. However, the reality was that this author used every means in her power to distance herself from such a title. She worked to separate herself from the Wollstonecraft-like persona which threatened any woman who took it upon herself to exit the home and enter the working, writing world. Maria Edgeworth did not wish her texts to stir up trouble; in fact she desired the opposite. The themes of her texts indicate that Edgeworth’s goal was to reinforce certain societal and moral practices which were threatened by the changes necessitated by Enlightenment thought, the ongoing years of revolution, and the following age of Romanticism. Edgeworth was very careful to proclaim herself a moralist first and foremost, a daughter second, and a writer third. This progression was her way of combating the transgressive and dual nature inherent in any woman who dared to have her own writings published. If Edgeworth was going to uphold the status quo or attempt to reinstate it, she could not do so using the language of women’s reform. She understood that she was already stepping out of her bounds by taking up the pen, and so she aligned herself with prominent male figures (Richard Lovell Edgeworth and Edmund Burke for example) in order to validate her work; she criticized the smallest immorality in thought, deed, fashion, and literature in order to clear her works of any blemishes which could potentially harm her reputation as a proper Lady;\(^2\) she introduced her texts not as novels but as conduct books which served to teach and to

\(^2\) Mary Poovey (The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen, 1984) asserts that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the function of a woman as a “proper Lady” was in conflict with the function of a woman as a writer—the former a reserved “cipher” defined by her relation to men, the latter a public threat to the balance of the patriarchal society.
improve rather than to entertain and corrupt; and so, she often openly championed the patriarch as the rightful ruler of the family, the estate, the finances, and all else in order to further separate herself from any subversive label that might be applied. While using the guise of a conduct book did indeed allow Edgeworth to write, to make money, and to gather a following of readers while simultaneously remaining a subservient female under the care of her father, it did not fully alleviate those transgressions. There was no way to fully reconcile the double identities which Edgeworth faced as a woman and a writer—as one who both adheres to and shatters society’s construct of woman. Mary Poovey calls this doubleness the “paradoxes of propriety” because during the “late eighteenth century, moralists described femininity as innate” while at the same time they “insisted that feminine virtues needed constant cultivation” (Poovey 15).

Edgeworth chose the genre of fiction to cultivate femininity in her readership, but in a patriarchal framework, it is that genre which threatens her own femininity. We must remember that despite the genres that Edgeworth assigns to her texts in order to avoid the novel label (conduct book, morality tale, etc.), they are indeed novels and as such present fantastical characters and events which in turn reveal an ulterior, passionate side of Edgeworth—a side which our author may not necessarily wish us to see and which betrays her position in society. The themes of her texts, as we will see in Chapters 4 and 5 in particular, reveal that Edgeworth wrote to uphold the status quo. It is the language of these texts, however—the diction and rhetoric she employs and the

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3 Edgeworth does not champion the patriarch in all of her works, for example Letters for Literary Ladies; however, she does so in the main texts which comprise this study.
accent and dialogue of her characters—that causes tension. We will further develop our discussion of the function of language in Chapter 2.

Chapter 1
Developing Codes of Conduct

Before exploring the function of language in regard to the three main texts of this thesis—Belinda (1801), The Absentee (1811), and Castle Rackrent (1800)—we must establish why exactly Edgeworth might have desired to uphold the status quo. In response to which forces was Edgeworth commenting? The didactic quality of Edgeworth’s works maintains that the author had something other than (or in addition to) entertainment in mind when writing. Edgeworth may indeed have set out to educate her readers and to reinforce the values jeopardized by the events of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. While she certainly did not attempt to change all aspects of the world around her, the themes of her texts imply that she wrote to amend certain things (the education of women for example) and to sustain those institutions which were challenged (the patriarchy, moral behavior, and the class system). It is the surrounding world in which she lived that will better clarify what Edgeworth set out to accomplish within her texts and why.

As mentioned above, the Enlightenment was the major force driving the changes of the late eighteenth century and beyond, but it was also one of Edgeworth’s personal points of contention. As a proclaimed supporter of tolerance as well as Judeo-Christian, European, and Anglo morality, Edgeworth, along with other nineteenth-century Romantics, judged the Enlightenment a “soulless” (Porter 2) movement. The
Enlightenment’s criticism and rejection of Christianity along with the religion’s dogma, superstition, and faith meant, to Edgeworth, the dissolving of morality—or at least the dissolving of the social, political, and class boundaries which (again in her mind) facilitated morality. But can Edgeworth really be called tolerant when she does not promote equality either in regard to religion, class, nationality, or gender? She does encourage tolerance and peace between factions, but she still refrains from purporting any sort of egalitarianism and insists on the necessity for social distinctions. Despite this disguised intolerance, there is one thing that Edgeworth would wish her readers to learn: one should combat immorality in two ways. The first is by relentlessly and completely controlling one’s passions and the second is by employing one’s powers of reasoning. Edgeworth was not blindly opposed to any and all changes spurred by the Enlightenment, but she viewed any change that liberated corruption or inspired indiscretion a change for the worse. The status quo that Edgeworth writes to uphold deals mainly with that of morality during a period when consumerism, modernity, and the individual, along with the discrediting of religion, allowed more room for unconcealed vice than ever before.

Beyond buttressing her readers’ moral behavior, another one of Edgeworth’s goals was to promote the patriarchal system. It became imperative that her textual issues and ideas remain supportive of such a structure and within its realm. Unlike Mary Wollstonecraft who quarreled with Edmund Burke for attempting to uphold “the status quo because human nature could not take too much change or reality” (Todd 3),
Edgeworth aligns herself with such a man. Likewise, while Wollstonecraft chastises men for "considering females rather as women than human creatures" producing "alluring mistresses [rather] than affectionate wives and rational mothers" (1-2), Edgeworth chooses to depict her female characters, through the male gaze, as accessories to men.

We will return to Edgeworth's insistence on a patriarchal framework, but while we are on the topic of Wollstonecraft, there is one point on which Edgeworth would agree, although to a lesser extent, with Wollstonecraft: women's education. The public education of women was another code that Edgeworth wrote to support. But in the late eighteenth century, there were not many who did not wish and call for educational reform, and so Edgeworth does not overstep any boundaries that would draw attention to her in any radical way. R. M. Janes agrees that when Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792, it was not wholly received with disapproval as is the assumption. On the whole, the work was accepted as rational and scholarly by both men and women. Janes even goes so far as to claim that in regard to Wollstonecraft's call to reform women's education, "there did not exist an anti-feminist in England in 1790" (297). At the same time, however, there were ideas contained within *Rights of Woman* that were generally regarded as preposterous by most readers. For example, Wollstonecraft's idea that women should hold positions within the government and that "the distinction of sexes be obliterated" were two highly criticized

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4 *Ormond* (1817) is Edgeworth's version of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in novel form. In it she upholds his views, sometimes even borrowing his exact wording, in order to align herself with a great thinker and moralist.

5 We will return to the topic of women's education in Chapter 4 where we find Clarence Hervey regretting his attempt to educate Virginia in isolation.
notions (Janes 295). Janes further comments that while “Wollstonecraft stayed securely enough within the established boundaries of educational writing not to terrify her first readers, she ventured out of bounds often enough to exhilarate them” (297). This is where Maria Edgeworth is more like Mary Wollstonecraft than she would likely care to admit. Not by theme or content necessarily (although she does indulge in creating some extreme characters), but by writing novels does Edgeworth step beyond the bounds of accepted womanly conduct to resemble Wollstonecraft.

While Edgeworth respectfully endorses, through her characters and plots, the promotion of women’s education and useful function in society, she does not desire to completely reform the patriarchy in support of equality between the sexes. It is in this sense that Edgeworth comes across on the page as antifeminist. Paula Backscheider argues that textual female characters specifically functioned in opposition to male ones. “Every text” she explains, “has a space within it for the Other, for opposition, for obstacle” and women in fiction came to occupy that role (Backscheider 8). Throughout literary history we find fictional women taking on the role of “the Other”, and yet at the same time, and often inadvertently, these women characters served as revolutionary tools by which to redefine female identity in relation to their male counterparts. Just like the heroines in Edgeworth’s texts such as Belinda Portman and Grace Nugent, women in fiction were depicted as “representations of heroines who were simultaneously object and subject” (Backscheider 8). This duality of the function of women in fiction further highlights Edgeworth’s own position as one who was caught
between the world of men, of her father, of gender-specific roles, and the revolutionary movement of women’s reform.

Edgeworth’s support of the patriarchy raised and raises much debate. In particular, it is the relationship with her father that sheds such a controversial light on her works. Despite Edgeworth’s love and respect for her father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth is heavily disparaged by today’s critics as a dictating presence in her life and indeed in her works. Not only did her father function as an editor of Maria’s texts, but he was also listed as the coauthor of many of her published works. This joint process of writing and revising allowed and encouraged Richard Lovell Edgeworth to censure and perhaps manipulate his daughter’s creative authority. In one letter to her cousin, Sophy Ruxton, Edgeworth writes that her “[early drafts of Letters for Literary Ladies] are now disfigured by all manner of crooked marks of papa’s critical indignation, besides various abusive marginal notes, which I would not have you see for half a crown” (Hare 25). The question of how much influence Maria Edgeworth’s father actually had over his daughter’s writings is one that is explored by Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace in her book Their Fathers’ Daughters: Hanna Moore, Maria Edgeworth, and Patriarchal Complicity (1991). Kowaleski-Wallace focuses her book on the late eighteenth-century nuclear family precisely when the family structure begins to shift. As she was caught in the midst of this inescapable shift of power and values, a “new domestic ideology” is prevalent in Edgeworth’s novels (Kowaleski-Wallace vii). Kowaleski-Wallace refers to Edgeworth as a “daddy’s girl” who is both strongly associated with her father yet at the same time liberal and “enlightened” (ix). Richard Lovell Edgeworth, on the other hand,
became associated with questionable if not negative estimation. To feminist scholars, his influence over Maria has become known as something of a dominating and prohibitive nature as opposed to an inspirational or nurturing one. Kowakeski-Wallace suggests that Maria’s focus on morality, the patriarchy, and the Anglo-Irish politics of her day was a way for her to support and connect with her father despite her semi-radical thoughts on the education and place of women in society. On the other hand, her themes and her texts’ moralizing narrators could have been the direct result of Richard Lovell’s manipulation.

We cannot know for sure what sort of changes Edgeworth made to her fiction in anticipation of her father’s censure or what changes he personally made to her work, but we do know that some of Edgeworth’s spirit, passion, and even sense of the horrific were indeed stifled by Richard Lovell’s influence. The satiric and subversive styles of Castle Rackrent—Edgeworth’s first novel which was published anonymously and without the knowledge of her father—and Letters for Literary Ladies—her wittily seditious cross between essay and fiction published in 1795—reveal a sharp-tongued author. Edgeworth’s early education at Mrs. Davis’s School in England also exposed a bolder author. With such influences as her father and her education, it seems reasonable to assume that Edgeworth did not develop her codes of conduct on her own—especially when taking the following anecdote into consideration. It was while at school that Edgeworth was known for telling stories to her roommates which were not

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6 We will return to this idea in Chapter 6 when we look at Castle Rackrent, written without her father’s knowledge and without the moralizing, overpowering narrator that we find in both Belinda and The Absentee.
the models of morality, reason, and modesty for which she would later become famous. Instead, she wrote of “a mask made from the dried skin taken from a dead man’s face, which he put on when he wished to be disguised, and which he at other times kept buried at the foot of a tree” (Lawless). The intent of this essay is not to debate the extent to which Edgeworth’s writings were contorted due to all her external influences, but to draw attention to the many forces that worked to create a duality of interests in the author which in turn emerge in her texts. And while Kathryn Kirkpatrick asserts that Irish women writers basically employed a patriarchal means of communication, written in English, to defy the preset conceptions of nation and identity set in place by the male population with the intention of reformation, equality, and inclusion, Edgeworth’s texts do not seem so calculated or intentionally radical.

According to his daughter’s correspondences, Richard Lovell’s influence was not wholly tyrannical. Conducting his business in the presence of and with the help of his family (Maria was placed in charge of the estate accounts at the age of fifteen), Richard Lovell set an uncommon example for his household in regard to the place and purpose of women both in the house and in the world. He wrote to Maria after the death of his second wife to urge her to continue “the desire...of becoming amiable, prudent, and of use” and he also reminded her that “experience teaches...that to be happy we must be Good” (Lawless). This advice and other such words of encouragement from her father did not go unheeded by our young author. Edgeworth proved throughout her career

7 From Kathryn Kirkpatrick’s ‘Introduction’ to Border Crossings: Irish Women Writers and National Identities.
that she was indeed capable of using her literary talent to inspire her readers to follow the path of the morally righteous.

It would be wrong, however, to assume that Maria Edgeworth’s life was untested, or that it was easy for her to preach the message of morality simply because she did not experience hardship. On the contrary, Edgeworth witnessed firsthand the horrors of the Irish Rebellion in 1798 and its effects. Maria was twenty-one when she wrote to her aunt telling her of the family’s nearly fatal journey. The story goes as such: rebels were armed and marching through the towns of Ireland and had nearly reached Edgeworthstown. When the officers appeared to escort the entire Edgeworth family from their house, which was sure to be a target of the rebel troop, Richard Lovell decided at the last minute that they would not travel with the officers but follow behind them. These officers, carrying a large ammunition cart, proceeded ahead of the Edgeworths. Within half an hour Maria heard what she thought was thunder only to find that the ammunition cart had exploded. She writes:

The man who drove the cart was blown to atoms—nothing of him could be found; two of the horses were killed, others were blown to pieces and their limbs scattered to a distance; the head and body of a man were found a hundred and twenty yards from the spot...[we] rode past the trunk of the dead man, bloody limbs of horses, and two dead horses, by the help of men who pulled on our steeds. (Hare 46-7)

The Edgeworths, despite Ireland’s upheaval, returned to Edgeworthstown and one of Maria’s most well-known and colorful books was written the very next year, Castle Rackrent. While the Irish Rebellion was literally happening in her front yard, there were several other events occurring during her lifetime that helped Edgeworth to develop her codes of conduct. Although removed from immediate eyesight, both the
French Revolution (1789-1799) and the American Revolution (1775-1783) would have suggested to Edgeworth that there were certain values that needed to be reinstated at such an unstable time. The lesson that Edgeworth took away from such a revolutionary age was that passion of all kinds—from romantic love to political zeal—must always be under regulation. Throughout her life, the effects of passion were displayed in the forms of death, upheaval, and chaos. The result led to a recurring theme in Edgeworth's fiction: employment of reason is better in the long run, more effective, and more proper than passion.

Edgeworth may have indeed taken the events and the people that filled her life and translated them into fiction. Her texts deal with the proper conduct of men and women, the educational reform especially in regard to the female sex, the reinforcement of the patriarchy, and an overall adherence to what she deemed moral behavior—all seemingly connected to personal experiences. These themes however, become undermined by her rhetoric and diction and by her characters' accents, dialogue, and idioms. Chapter 2 will explore how the language of Edgeworth’s works serves to challenge her themes.

Chapter 2
The Tension of Language

A tension is created when a text outwardly claims one set of goals but inwardly accomplishes separate, even opposing, ones. Reflected in Edgeworth’s attempt to “dodge” the novel genre, is the element that Maria Edgeworth is more than what she claims to be, for if she indeed only intended to inspire moral reform and uphold the

...
status quo, she would have continued writing conduct books instead of novels, or she
would not have written (or more to the point, published) anything at all. The disconnect
between proper lady and woman writer is just one of Edgeworth’s contradictions,
dualities, tensions. Teresa Michals, also investigating Edgeworth’s dissonances, explores
the levels on which the author seems incongruous including the contradiction between
her belief in individualism and paternalism. She describes Edgeworth “as a dangerously
secular utilitarian and as a reassuringly didactic moralist” (Michals 1, emphasis added).
It is the argument of this thesis to establish that these two extremes—and all the
inconsistencies between what Edgeworth is and claims to accomplish through fiction
and what she actually achieves—are exposed through language. Language, for the
purpose of this argument, is twofold: the language of the text (the diction and rhetoric
that generate genre), and the language of the characters within that text (dialogue,
accent, idiom). In Chris Fauske’s words, the novel is a “distinctly British or imperial
cultural trope” (14). In that sense, the novel becomes an interesting medium for
Edgeworth to depict Ireland as it naturally and paradoxically lends itself to British form
and British edification. The tension created by using the British system of words
arranged in the form of the British novel to depict Irishness, or Otherness, is a major
source of contradiction in the works of Maria Edgeworth.

First, I consider Edgeworth’s use of the linguistic tropes and conventions of
educational material: the rhetoric of the conduct book. The rhetoric Edgeworth adopts
lends Belinda and The Absentee an overpoweringly didactic quality which has been
described as something akin to the conduct book genre. In general, the ultimate goal of the conduct book, or courtesy literature, is to address certain failings, changes, or faults in the structure of the existing society. By addressing these issues, the conduct book is able to inculcate good morals. According to Joyce Hemlow, the first objective of the conduct book genre is to establish principles. Then, once one has an understanding of the basic principles on which certain concepts are founded, the second step is to create a code of behavior out of those principles. Thirdly, manners are developed “insomuch as they are the visible result or expression of such morality” (Hemlow 733).

Edgeworth borrows the rhetoric of the conduct book and applies it to her fiction in order to steer her texts clear of the increasingly negative reputation of the novel during the nineteenth century. To attest to Edgeworth’s concern for the moral reform that the conduct book offers, she writes in a letter to Sir Walter Scott wondering “whether there would be a sufficient class of people liable to be influenced by such motives as I should present—not merely whether the individual character be possible or probable” (Butler 23). But despite Edgeworth’s written attempt to remove her texts from the novel genre, Bakhtin suggests that she significantly adds to the developing genre based on her use of dialogue, humor, and her focus on current events (7). The rhetoric Edgeworth employs to effectively write novels that serve as pedagogy creates this tension. She intentionally disguises the novel genre in order to battle immorality on its own level, but once again her position becomes transgressive as she uses novels to disparage novels.

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8 *Castle Rackrent* is not listed here because although there is indeed a moral to this story, Edgeworth does not place the moral at the forefront of her text. Only beneath the language of humor, folly, and sarcasm will we discover a serious conversation about the struggle of power between Ireland and England.
The second way in which I define language is the accent, dialogue, and idioms of the characters themselves. Edgeworth has specific notions of how individuals of each nation (Irish, Anglo-Irish, French, British, etc.), class, and gender should act. By varying the amount of dialogue a character exercises, Edgeworth is able to layer her characters into what she deems to be an appropriate hierarchy. She accomplishes the same sort of grouping with the accents employed or omitted by certain characters. Both dialogue and accent allow Edgeworth to separate her characters by nation, gender, and class and more importantly, allow her to make value judgments based on each.

Both dimensions of language (rhetoric of text, accent and dialogue of character) combine to form an overarching source of authority for Edgeworth and the root of all tension and duality in her texts. It is language that dilutes Edgeworth’s thematic codes of conduct. In his book, *The Dialogic Imagination*, Mikhail Bakhtin deals specifically with the issue of language in novels. With regard to Edgeworth’s use of accent and dialogue in particular, Bakhtin would assert that the very discourse of languages within her novels serves to create tension. Within her novels, Edgeworth equally singles out all parties (not just the colonials, working-class, and women, but the upper class and English as well) through each character’s use of accent, idiom, dialect, etc. And inevitably, Edgeworth succeeds in creating novels which adhere to Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism. “Dialogism,” as summed up by Sue Vice, “refers to the presence of two distinct voices in one utterance” (45) and is, according to Bakhtin, the source of all tension within the novel. Bakhtin defines the novel “as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices artistically
organized" (262). He argues further that all instances of national language are, in fact, required in order to create a novel:

The internal stratification of any single national language into social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic language, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions, languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day...this internal stratification present in every language at any given moment of its historical existence is the indispensable prerequisite for the novel as a genre. (262-3, emphasis added)

In the next paragraphs, we will look at how Bakhtin’s list of prerequisites is strikingly similar to the ways in which Edgeworth utilizes language within her texts.

In Belinda, The Absentee, and Castle Rackrent, Bakhtin’s “social dialects” of language are the only means by which we are able to differentiate the characters. Each character’s dialect reveals his nationality, his class, and therefore his level of morality. The characters whose dialects or accents are not perceptible are considered English, or possibly Anglo-Irish as in the cases of Grace and Colambre (The Absentee) and are therefore morally obligated to set the example for the other nationalities betrayed by their respective dialects. Castle Rackrent, for example, is a staggering display of dialect as it pits one narrator, an Irishman blindly faithful to his Anglo-Irish masters, whose accent and idioms make him unreliable, against the Editor, a witty, educated, overpowering character without any definable accent. And in Belinda, the splitting of language into social dialect determines class and nationality—as the novel deals mainly with English characters, the few dialects at hand present a jarring contrast to the rest of the text. Indeed, the appearances of Juba the African servant and Solomon the Jew in
Belinda illustrate how Edgeworth uses dialect to place any non-English characters very low in the social hierarchy.

Bakhtin's remaining prerequisites are also exhibited in Edgeworth's texts. “Group behavior” is marked by the language of gossip among the men in Belinda and the women in The Absentee. Bakhtin's "languages of authority" are utilized by the men in all three texts denoting Edgeworth's insistence on adhering to patriarchy. Edgeworth also gives the language of authority to her moral female characters such as Belinda Portman and Grace Nugent. The linguistic authority of these moral women, however, comes mainly from the fact that for much of their novels they remain silent. When they do choose to speak, their (moral) language is so powerful because it is in direct contrast to their former silences. Women like Lady Delacour and Lady Clonbrony will never possess the language of authority because they are far too outspoken. Additionally, Bakhtin's language of "passing fashions" will be addressed in chapter five when we discuss Lady Clonbrony in The Absentee. Bakhtin's thesis is epitomized in Castle Rackrent as two separate narrators verbally battle each other for text and for power. As we will see in greater detail momentarily, each of these novels contains heavy sociopolitical themes as they all deal with major current events from absenteeism, to the education of women, to the French Revolution, to the Irish Rebellion.

In short, Edgeworth wields her own sort of authorial power despite her insistence on female subservience. By manipulating the rhetoric of her texts as well as her characters' accents and dialogue, Edgeworth is able to suppress certain characters and endorse others in order to reinforce her particular agenda which is to stem the
influx of immorality that accompanies reform and to reinforce such pillars as patriarchy, imperialism, morality, and, perhaps most important to Edgeworth, the controlling of one’s passions.

Chapter 3
Edgeworth’s Interpretation of the Burgeoning Novel Genre

Edgeworth encountered the effects of passion not only in the political, military, and social worlds as discussed above, but in the literary world as well. If the novel was born, as some claim, in 1719 with the publication of Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, then eighty years later when Edgeworth would have been publishing her first novel, the genre would have had a chance to develop (Robert 57). And develop it did. The novel expanded in the eighteenth century in two separate ways: in notoriety and in popularity. Viewed at its “birth” as a “much-despised byproduct of literature,” the novel was generally considered “a lie, insipid and sentimental by nature and created to corrupt men’s hearts and their tastes” (Robert 57). And as such, the novel was a way for readers to indulge in the fantastic, the horrific, the romantic without indulging in truly immoderate behavior. So the novel became the notorious illegitimate child of a “nobler” literature and one that scholars and readers were quick to publicly disown but also quick to read, making the genre notoriously popular. Marthe Robert goes on to depict the novel as an upstart, a power, a usurper of other genres, and a colonizer of literature and as such, he writes, the novel eventually graduated “from a discredited sub-category to an almost unprecedented” authority (58). While Edgeworth would not wish to chance her reputation on writing such controversial texts due to their notoriety,
she would also not chance her expansive readership (and therefore her paycheck) by wholly disregarding such a popular field.

With careful calculations, then, Edgeworth assembled her texts. She wrote about fictional characters and romantic plots, but she did not fully surrender her texts to the genre as did Henry Fielding with *Tom Jones* (1749) or Mary Shelley with *Frankenstein* (1818). So instead of writing pure fiction in novel form, Edgeworth disguised her fiction with lessons in morality, etiquette, and reason; she labeled her novels memoir and moral tale; she added her father's stamp and words of approval to her texts. These cosmetic applications allowed Edgeworth the freedom to dabble in the bizarre, experiment in the immoral, and indulge in the comedic while remaining within the bounds of morality and propriety. But as a writer—even a writer of moral fiction—can Edgeworth really remain the "proper Lady" that Mary Poovey constructs? Audrey Bilger says yes...and no. While the use of comedy in fiction "can [indeed] be enlisted for conservative ends, to preserve order and to uphold the status quo", it can also demonstrate a "radical and subversive" side (Bilger 9). Laughter, according to Bilger, is a form of ridicule and therefore a feminist gesture of sorts. But as we have already discussed, Edgeworth did not set out to redefine the role of women in society, and she certainly did not wish to be considered feminist or radical. So it became imperative for Edgeworth to disguise her fiction as anything other than fiction in order to maintain polite, "feminine" appearances. Edgeworth's novels could have even inspired a genre Michael Gamer refers to as the "romances of real life" which "attempt[ed] to mediate

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9 More on the effects of comedy in women's literature in the Conclusion.
itself between [history and romance] while differentiating itself from other kinds of
factual fiction" (236). The point of combining real life and romance was to lend the text
validity as well as excitement. Gamer puts it best when he writes: “[the genre’s] stated
purpose of providing instruction...is usually made in earnest...explain[ing] the text’s
wholesome reliance on ‘real life’ and ‘fact’ while promising the same ‘amusement’
provided by romances” (238). This hybrid technique was extremely successful for
Edgeworth as the novel’s ability to assimilate other genres naturally lent itself to
Edgeworth’s purpose—the novel, as she interpreted the genre, gave her an effective
medium with which to uphold values as well as turn a profit.

The eighteenth century saw the novel barge its way into the literary spotlight, it
saw rebellions and revolutions transform former political, social, and familial norms, and
furthermore, the events of the eighteenth century stimulated the rise of the middle
class, the individual, and the economy. Such an economic thrust as the Industrial
Revolution not only challenged the old aristocracy and order, it rendered most of it
superfluous. The old world, however, is where Edgeworth and her family had existed
successfully for generations. And as upholding the social forces challenged by
revolution is the driving force within Edgeworth’s texts, the economic status of Ireland
and England could certainly be added to her list of ideals to defend. But in this, as in
arguably all aspects of her writing, Edgeworth is Janus-faced. On one hand she berates
the individual desire for amassing wealth and possessions, yet on the other hand she

10 Lady Clonbrony (The Absentee) is a perfect example of the scorn Edgeworth has for such superficial
economic aspirations—she is a woman who will not move back to her home in Ireland because she
dislikes the furniture in her old estate.
seems obsessed with fashion and is more than ready to record the slightest details regarding the chic and the stylish. Edgeworth accentuates the treasures (fabrics, carpets, coaches) that her individual characters purchase by means of this new and blossoming economy; however, her obsession with fashion is kept in check by her belief that “each individual is first and foremost a type within a system of classification that is at once moral and social” (Michals 3). And to classify her characters and thereby influence her readers, Edgeworth manipulates the rhetoric of her texts with the help of her moralizing narrators.

Manipulating the linguistic tropes within the novel is a subtle way for Edgeworth to indirectly comment on the issues of morality, patriarchy, and economy without drawing censure from society. It is in this fuzzy space between fiction and conduct book that our author is able to indulge in, uphold, and then criticize all that she sees in the world around her without entirely sacrificing her feminine identity—something she would have had to forfeit had she fully embraced fiction and the novel genre.

Edgeworth not only drifts between genres, she also drifts between nations. Her Anglo-Irish identity signifies that she is hyphenated, split, caught somewhere between being English, being Irish, being neither, and being both. As her novels will reveal, not even Edgeworth herself knew exactly what to do with the question of Anglo-Irish nationality.

In particular, The Absentee and Castle Rackrent both struggle with the idea of a hyphenated people. In Chapters 4, 5, and 6, we will look specifically at the ways in

\[\text{Again in The Absentee we find page upon page devoted to the description of Lady Clonbrony’s gala with a meticulous attention to detail that may indeed be mockery on Edgeworth’s part, but nonetheless allows for indulgence.}\]
which Edgeworth constructs, or deconstructs, nationality based on her characters’
dialects. Edgeworth chooses to include multiple dialects in her texts—we will encounter
French, Hibernian, and Jamaican accents among others. The inclusion of these “minor”
languages results in a distortion of the major language. Momentarily, we will discuss
that although this deconstruction is done unintentionally on Edgeworth’s part, it
nonetheless occurs. And the very result of bringing down the major language makes
Edgeworth and her novels revolutionary.

By writing Irish fiction in the English language, Edgeworth’s texts fall under
Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of minor literature: a minority’s (Irish) construct of a
major (English) language (16). In fact, Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of minor
literature is threefold, and Edgeworth’s texts embody all three points. The authors
assert that “the first characteristic of a minor literature...is that in it language is affected
with a high coefficient of deterritorialization” (16). Edgeworth succeeds in
“deterritorialization” by distorting the standard English language with Irish (among
other) accents and phrases. She takes the major language of the colonizer and
inadvertently turns it into a minor language much as Kafka did when writing stories in
Prague German which, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is only “appropriate for
strange and minor uses” (17). “The second characteristic of minor literatures“, and one
which we touched upon above, “is that everything in them is political” (Deleuze,
Guattari 17). Finally, the third characteristic deals with the collectively narrated nature
of the text. Edgeworth utilizes a collective narrator in her texts in order to “forge the
means for another consciousness and another sensibility” (Deleuze, Guattari 17) that
would condemn any paths leading to immorality. The collective, omniscient, unaffiliated narrator is at work in two of the three texts of this essay. It is the narrators of *Belinda* and *The Absentee* who do our judging for us and with subtle sarcasm these narrators become the voice of the moral majority. Moreover, the collective narrators are neither strictly Irish nor strictly English, but unaffiliated. Through this lack of accent and therefore lack of nationality, the reader is able to inhabit the role of narrator and assume the responsibility of moral judge. We as readers are made present in the novel through the narrators’ collective moralizing.

Again, it is important to note that Deleuze and Guattari would argue that deterritorialization is a *deliberate* act of taking power away from the major language. Kafka, for example, chose to write in Prague German as a way to break down the major German language. This, however, is not the case with Edgeworth—remember her themes seek to uphold the status quo. But by including minor dialects into the discourses of her texts, she is participating in an inadvertent destabilizing of the major English language. Bakhtin’s idea of the effect of minor languages—he calls these dialects—is a more passive, cause-and-effect type account of Deleuze and Guattari’s deterritorialization and may better describe what occurs in Edgeworth’s novels:

> ...these dialects, on entering the literary language and preserving within it their own dialectological elasticity, their other-languagedness, have the effect of deforming the literary language; [the major language] too, ceases to be that which it had been, a closed socio-linguistic system. (294)

Edgeworth’s inclusion of accent and idiom is indeed minor for all the reasons Deleuze and Guattari cite, but she does not intentionally seek to marginalize the English language. The destabilizing effect of the languages in Edgeworth’s texts more...
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resembles Bakhtin’s byproduct of voice than Deleuze and Guattari’s deliberate
destruction. Intentional or not, however, the end result is the same: minor dialects,
accents, languages ultimately undermine the major language they occupy.

The problem with labeling Edgeworth’s work as “minor literature” in the same
way that Deleuze and Guattari address Kafka’s work is that to be a thing other than or
outside of the major is nothing if not revolutionary. It seems that despite her desire to
evade the extreme, Edgeworth had wandered directly into its midst. Through the minor
dialects of her texts, Edgeworth intensifies the “discordant function” (Deleuze, Guattari
22) of words thereby undermining any moral code or patriarchal support she attempts
to propagate. Because Edgeworth’s rhetoric and her characters’ accents and dialogue
introduce tension and discordance, her texts cannot escape a sort of schizophrenic
quality. And so, in attempting to maintain the status quo, she haphazardly succeeds in
undermining it by the very words she chooses to include. The following textual
explications will investigate the duality within each work and demonstrate that
Edgeworth emphasizes themes that uphold the existing patriarchal, moral, class,
economic, and national power structures, while simultaneously destabilizing them
through her use of rhetoric, accent, dialogue, and idiom.

Chapter Four
Dialogue in Belinda Denotes “The Other”

We begin our study of Edgeworth’s codes of conduct and the language—in this
case dialogue—that serves to destabilize them with Belinda. The first and primary
reason to begin here is because her codes revolving around race and nationality, gender
and moral behavior are considerably more clear-cut when compared to her other works. Just as we will see in *The Absentee*, Edgeworth uses an intentional rhetoric as well as her characters' dialogue and accents as one way to reveal each particular character's level of propriety and therefore morality. However, *Belinda* is a simpler study in that the novel does not deal with the complexities of defining the Anglo-Irish, Irish, and British nationalities; instead, this novel primarily uses accent to denote any character other than the white English citizens of the upper-middle class which comprise the majority of the characters. Edgeworth uses the accents of two characters in particular—Juba the slave and Solomon the Jew—to identify those who are noticeably foreign, making for some blatant racial implications. Secondly, we begin here because *Belinda* is essentially the beginning of Edgeworth's career as a writer of didactic society novels. By exploring how Edgeworth establishes certain codes of conduct in *Belinda*, we can then move forward to better understand some of the more complex issues in *The Absentee* and also backward to a conversation regarding the divergent and experimental style of *Castle Rackrent*.

Witty, comical, and, at times, schizophrenic, *Belinda* is a novel about a novel, or at least a novel about the reading of novels as well as the writing of them. The original text was written in 1801 marking Maria Edgeworth's first society novel, preceded only by her anonymously published *Castle Rackrent*. Her works prior to her novels include children's stories, textbooks, and her hybrid work *Letters for Literary Ladies*. Due to the novel's notorious status as a genre, it became essential for Edgeworth that her first

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12 We will refer to her fiction as novels despite Edgeworth's attempts to distance her works from the title and herself from the profession.
society novel—if it was to educate and instruct its readers—would not be confused with other inappropriate and immoral works of that same genre. To accomplish this, Edgeworth details morality in three ways: through Lady Delacour’s character, the unnamed narrator (moral guide) of Belinda, and the heroine Belinda. In utilizing these devices she is able to comment on the dangers of novel writing and reading, creating a modern, metafictional spin on this early nineteenth-century work. But as Kathryn J. Kirkpatrick mentions in her introduction, the “indiscriminate dismissal of the genre” in its entirety is “superficial and thoughtless” (xii). Edgeworth understood this, so she did not totally disavow the rhetoric of the novel genre despite its ability to inspire the passions—a quality she condemns. The benefits of novel reading—“to improve the understanding and form both character and taste” (xiii)—are indeed highlighted in what Belinda herself chooses to read. The dialogue of the characters, specifically the many allusions and literary references made by Lady Delacour, also serve to justify Edgeworth’s choice in using the novel to instill morality.

The literature referenced in Belinda is one way for Edgeworth to add credibility to her fiction and thereby distance it from the dishonorable reputation of other novels. While a discussion of Edgeworth’s opinion of literature seems removed from our discussion of accent and dialogue, we must first address the novel’s themes that will reveal the codes of conduct being addressed, which will then lead us back into our primary discussion of nationality and morality. To begin, Bakhtin writes that a novel is considered a novel only when “contemporary reality serves as [its] subject” (22). Edgeworth’s fiction submits to this definition fully. And by stressing the importance of
reading texts which develop and heighten one's capacity to reason, Edgeworth points her readers in the direction of morality and the suppression of passion as opposed to other novels in which "folly, errour, and vice" reign (3). One of Belinda's themes focuses on educating readers how to read—in other words, which texts are appropriate to read. Historical textual references also work to strengthen the fictional characters that evoke them. Marilyn Butler comments on the effect of interweaving the historical with the fictional:

...the naming of authors and books, and allusions to familiar thoughts and ideas...make[s] characters knowable, but in a new way, by having them reveal their own cultural milieu, deepened for the reader by the use of real-life people and the words they used. (270)

Butler rightly argues that historical allusions create realistic characters, but Edgeworth above all employs literary references as a way to distance her novels from other fantastical or horrific novels which may also contain allusions. By mixing history with fiction, Edgeworth creates a type of novel that could easily be confused with reality and is therefore able to influence the minds of those who read it. But despite the real-life contextualization found throughout Belinda, we as readers must first learn to trust the characters if we are to trust their reading preferences.

Belinda is the character whose integrity it is imperative we trust. As the novel proceeds, Belinda undergoes an important change that is highlighted in her dialogue. Belinda begins her bildungsroman "in favor of rank and fashion" and even "as a puppet in the hands of others"; however, she does not long remain as such (10). Upon

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13 This quote is taken from Edgeworth's "Advertisement" preceding Belinda. Here, she directly relays her intention to label her novel not as such, but as a "Moral Tale" instead. Edgeworth chooses to classify her writing along the same lines as the conduct or courtesy book, which essentially serves to justify her imaginative text as well as her career as a woman writer.
witnessing Lady Delacour’s less than agreeable marriage and the way she conducts herself in regard to Clarence Hervey, Belinda quickly “bec[omes] wonderfully clear sighted to all the improprieties of her Ladyship’s conduct” (15). This moral meter that Belinda develops early on in the novel helps her to conduct herself in an increasingly reasonable and honorable manner which basically means she is finally able to not only control her own emotions and actions, but also to influence those around her through her words, her lack of words, and her example. It is only after Belinda becomes the moral compass of the tale that the narrator refers to her as “our heroine,” giving us permission to trust her (143). Belinda is the moral center of the novel, but she is also made to prove herself time after time against all the other characters that attempt to sway, slander, and seduce her. Edgeworth wants to ensure her heroine is infallible. In fact, Belinda is so steady in her beliefs and irreproachable in her actions that Lady Delacour accuses her of being cold: “‘I never wish to be as cool as you are, Belinda!’” (361) and Mr. Vincent, her suitor, wishes she was more human than godlike: “he could not help thinking, that if Belinda had more faults she would be more amiable” (426). By commenting on Belinda’s propensity to stray so far from passion that she ends up cold and almost unfeeling, Edgeworth is able to solidify Belinda’s reliable, immovable character. Because Belinda is somewhat cold, possibly unfeeling, definitely impassionate, and almost annoyingly righteous, we are able to fully trust all that she says, does, and therefore all that she reads. Also, due to Belinda’s impenetrable moral character, we are able to indulge in this novel—guilt free—without fear that the text, or Belinda for that matter, will lead us down unholy paths.
With such a character as Belinda as our guide, we are allowed to safely indulge in fiction and also to learn about other texts from which our morality would benefit. Edgeworth does more than simply mention in passing what she considers character-building texts; she posits throughout *Belinda* quotes in both French and English as relayed to us by her wittiest and best of characters—Lady Delacour. Butler attributes these insertions to Edgeworth’s attempt to create a “more stylized, consciously intellectual cosmopolitan novel” that could be, and indeed was, read by “metropolitan France, metropolitan England, and rural Ireland” alike (Butler 269). Edgeworth’s success as an early nineteenth-century woman writer as well as the popularity of her novels attests to her ability to combine fiction, history, moral tale, comedy, and conduct book into a truly multinational novel. If it were up to Belinda, however, this novel would not be nearly as cosmopolitan. We can thank Lady Delacour for leading *Belinda* in fashionable directions.

Lady Delacour is the wit of *Belinda* and is always ready with a line or two of Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Sheridan, or Dryden. In that sense, Lady Delacour becomes her own commentary on language—she tucks her “true” and vulnerable self away behind the words of others. Her dialogue in the novel is packed with images, allusions, and symbols which she borrows from other estimable works and employs for her own fashionably manipulative ends. But the narrator makes certain that Lady Delacour, while she comes across as the well-read, witty life of the party, is not to be emulated. For example, Belinda and the narrator criticize Lady Delacour on several occasions for being a talented actress who manages to keep her dark secrets hidden from the public
by utilizing her sharp wit, her obsession with the fashionable, and her knowledge of society: "abroad, and at home, Lady Delacour was two different persons" (10). Lady Delacour claims, "what I suffer in private is known only to my own heart" (67) and indeed she keeps up the pretence that all is well until Belinda’s good sense is able to penetrate her wall. But it is precisely because Lady Delacour hides her afflictions and takes on a separate public role that her physical body and moral state deteriorate. Belinda then, provides the angelic counterpart to Lady Delacour’s devilish persona in order for readers to make the distinction between good and evil, or at least a moral character and one who is misled. For we are told that "lady Delacour was governed by pride, by sentiment, by whim, by enthusiasm, by passion—by any thing but reason,” and that is her ultimate failing (271).

As a self-proclaimed actress, Lady Delacour and her story constitute the majority of Belinda, and in this light, as Kirkpatrick’s introduction suggests, the novel may have done just as well under the title Lady Delacour. There are at least three possible explanations as to why Edgeworth focuses the text around Lady Delacour despite the title. The first is simply because a character like Lady Delacour, one who is charismatic, flamboyant, attention-crazed, and sinister at times, is more fun to write and to read. She naturally steals the show, and Edgeworth allows her to do so. The second reason for Lady Delacour’s dominance is indirectly related to Belinda. A lady, in Mary Poovey’s sense, does not take center stage. So if Belinda is set up as the heroine of the novel who is good natured, constant, moral, innocent, regulated, and silent, then it seems appropriate that she relinquish her place at the forefront of the novel to act instead as
an unspoken moral example to her more materialistic counterpart: Lady Delacour.

Belinda's lack of presence and voice in the novel reinforces her subservient qualities as the heroine of the tale. The third reason that Edgeworth may have centered her novel heavily on Lady Delacour is to move her work away from the label of novel, as she expresses in her “Advertisement” preceding the text. Lady Delacour’s superior wit and public persona—not to mention all her literary allusions and the fact that she plays separate roles in public and in prive—lend the novel a dramatic feel. The end especially, when Lady Delacour sets up her players “in proper attitudes for stage effect”, takes the text beyond the realm of novel and into the theatrical world (478). The narrator even comments that “narration feebly supports enthusiasm” when comparing the novel to the stage (335). So Lady Delacour, by stealing the novel, forfeits her position as heroine to Belinda and takes the novel beyond and outside of itself.

While Lady Delacour contributes to the novel’s dramatic feel, the unnamed narrator pushes Belinda even further beyond itself in an almost metafictional direction. And Belinda’s narrator, whether it is assumed to be Edgeworth’s own voice or not, is careful to lend a balanced opinion of novel reading and writing within the text. On the one hand, we are reminded that the heroes of most novels “act...without common sense” (133), that “books only spoil the originality of genius” (227), and that it is possible for one’s character to be “spoiled by early novel-reading” (408). We are also told that novel writers are “unjust” (256). While this may prove to be a bleak and prejudiced opinion of the genre, Edgeworth’s narrator does present the opposing side as well. Belinda reminds us that while novels can indeed be unjust, they can also be
timeless works of art and truthful portrayals of the human spirit. Dr. X—, a character we recognize as learned, compassionate, and trustworthy, readily cites Chaucer in defense of the written word: “Pardon me,” he says, “some people, as well as some things, never grow old-fashioned” (319). While we know that novel-reading has tainted Virginia, it has, at the same time, educated her to some idea, however warped, of the outside world from which she is barred: “The eloquence of romance persuaded her, that she should not only discover, but love her father with intuitive filial piety, and she longed to experience those yearnings of affection, of which she had read so much” (409). It is important to note that Virginia is not tainted solely by novel-reading. She has been cast by Clarence Hervey as his personal, fictional heroine—a role that Virginia is not educated enough to comprehend or sustain and that nearly ruins her. The novel, according to Belinda, is most certainly a fantasy world where “romantic views and visionary ideas of happiness” lead readers away from reality; however, despite Edgeworth’s plea to consider her own novel a “Moral Tale,” it is inarguably one of the very novels she warns her readers against (379).

Proper conduct, according to the narrator of Belinda, can be learned even from a text as transgressive as a novel. The morals that Edgeworth would have her readers learn from Belinda center on two main themes: the employment of reason and the function of education. In particular, we are taught that the rationality of reasoning should be utilized over the sentimentality of feeling. “Sensibility,” Clarence Hervey tells us, “is the parent of great talents and great virtues” (367). Furthermore, the narrator is very clear in her opinion that women should be included in the educational process in
order to sharpen their own inherent powers of reasoning. Upon spending time in the Delacour household, Belinda quickly learns to value her own judgments. The narrator informs us that “Belinda saw things in a new light; and for the first time in her life she reasoned for herself upon what she saw and felt” (69). This passage marks the beginning of Belinda’s journey into rationality and therefore her journey into womanhood, society, and more importantly, morality. From that point on, our heroine uses her capacity to rationalize, philosophize, and reason and in doing so creates the narrator’s ideal nineteenth-century woman. The narrator perhaps, pushes her point too far and succeeds in creating a character in Belinda Portman to whom readers cannot fully relate. Because we do not live in a world void of emotion, we cannot understand how Belinda can be sensible to the point of marrying where she does not love. Even Lady Delacour observes that Belinda’s “love for Hervey has been smothered by cold philosophy” (331). By contrast, we are better able to relate to Lady Delacour’s sprightly wit and enthusiasm than to Belinda’s hard reasoning, and we agree that Belinda is “invulnerable to the light shafts of wit...when [she is] cased in this heavy armour of reason” (321). We come to understand that despite her faults, Lady Delacour is not a bad or an evil character, but that her true downfall lies in her inability to be governed by reason. On the other hand, the narrator makes it perfectly clear that Belinda does not suffer from the lack of reason that leads to passion and is therefore the heroine of the tale. Belinda uses Lady Delacour as an example of impropriety and subsequently learns from her mistakes: “she had sometimes seen lady Delacour in starts of passion that seemed to border on insanity, and the idea of her losing all command of her reason now
struck Belinda with irresistible force. She felt the necessity for preserving her own composure” (203). Belinda, here shown in the early stages of her role as heroine, is now able to identify the ill effects of passion in the lives of others and even exercise her own restraint.

Despite Belinda’s own tenacious rigidity regarding reason, the text provides softer cues in favor of knowledge and reason from characters that we are more apt to relate to. Dr. X— is hailed as one of the novel’s sympathetic philosophers who uses his knowledge to inspire Belinda to reason for herself. He claims that truth “is the same for all the world that can understand it”—male or female (318). Likewise, Mr. Percival is a character who is fortunate enough to possess a functional sort of reasonableness. He talks at length with Belinda on the detrimental effects of choosing a mate out of feeling instead of fact. Using his own example of a marital bliss, he convinces Belinda that being in love is sentimental and, in fact, less desirable than loving someone for his or her utility and qualities—a conversation Belinda directly repeats to Lady Delacour. With such reasonable characters to offset the bad examples of Lady Delacour, Mrs. Stanhope, and Harriet Freke, Belinda is able to find her own mind and develop it through practice and reading, resulting in a strong, learned, rational (albeit rigid) heroine.

It is not enough, however, for Belinda to function as a static picture of morality; her value as the heroine is also measured by her interactions with other characters within the text. Belinda proves her superior sensibilities and manages to influence others by controlling her ability to speak—her dialogue with those around her. While Lady Delacour uses her “sarcastic powers of wit, and the fond tone of persuasion, to
accomplish her purposes” (70), Belinda uses her words sparingly and only for the good of truth, honor, and all that is righteous. Much as Grace Nugent does, as we will see when discussing *The Absentee*, Belinda Portman values the economy of words. In fact, all the characters surrounding Belinda take their turns placing their own interpretations onto her silence, resulting in several potential disasters for Belinda’s future in society. Clarence Hervey reads Belinda’s silence as an attempt to gain a husband and as a lack of “delicacy”, and Lady Delacour reads Belinda’s silence as nothing more than “prudery” (81). However, once Belinda’s character as the moral paradigm is solidified, those around her no longer mistake her silence for anything other than propriety and decency. Her character, in part, is made known through the words she chooses and the way in which she speaks them: when Belinda does exercise her voice, she does not partake in the gossip, the raillery, or even the wit used by other characters. Belinda speaks tenderly to win over Marriott the maid, she “seriously expostulate[s]” with Lady Delacour for her wrong-doings, and she wins over Clarence Hervey all through the reasonableness and economy of her words (82). Understanding Belinda’s calculated use of dialogue reveals a more knowing side to our heroine which she chooses to suppress. Belinda exhibits the type of duality that we will encounter later in Lady Clonbrony and in Thady M’Quirk—characters, like Edgeworth herself, torn between subversion and propriety, vulgarity and morality, Ireland and England.

In addition to the importance of reason, Edgeworth also uses *Belinda* to promote the education of women. Her views can be summed up in the words of Clarence Hervey who notes, “nothing could be more absurd than my scheme of educating a woman in
solitude, to make her fit for society” (472). And indeed it is not Virginia’s naivety that Clarence finally admires and respects, but Belinda’s capacity for thought; for “the virtues of Virginia sprang from sentiment, those of Belinda, from reason” and we are made to understand that reason is clearly preferable to sentiment (379). While Edgeworth may be in tune with Mary Wollstonecraft and the popular feminist view at the time that women should be educated in the ways of literature, philosophy, and the sciences, she draws a clear line as to how far women should carry their demands for equality. Harriet Freke provides readers with an example of what happens when women are afforded too much freedom.\(^4\)

As we consider Belinda’s journey into the reasonable and rational side of life in contrast with Harriet’s over-the-top crash course on how not to behave, we can understand why Mr. Percival asks: “without diminishing their grace, softness, or delicacy, might not [women] cultivate their minds?” (233). While this question still ultimately reduces women to their ability to please men, it remains in line with Edgeworth’s own opinion of the place of women based on the themes and characters in Belinda. Our narrator does not forego the chance to insert what she deems to be the necessary qualities of the female sex. Among other things, a woman must be mild, useful, accomplished, delicate, and sensible. Through Clarence Hervey we find an even more demanding view of what women should convey:

...simplicity without vulgarity, ingenuity without cunning...ignorance without prejudice...an understanding totally uncultivated, yet likely to reward the labor of late instruction; a heart wholly unpracticed, yet full of sensibility, capable of

\(^4\) We will return to Harriet Freke in full detail below when taking dialogue into further consideration.
all the enthusiasm of passion, the delicacy of sentiment, and the firmness of rational constancy. (362)

Here, passion is held as a virtue but only if it is accompanied by rationality and sensibility. Needless to say Clarence does not meet with such a woman. Instead he finds that a woman can indeed be in the world, educated by in the world, and tested by the world and still retain those soft qualities which make her so attractive to the male sex. Belinda is depicted as the most agreeable link between the feminine (sentimental) and the masculine (rational) worlds, but because she is seen as valuable only in relation to what she can offer the men of the novel, she is still objectified.

Edgeworth does not pretend to be an activist for the rights of women. She does not claim that both sexes should be placed on an equal field; instead, she respectfully argues for the necessity to cultivate learning and reason through education. Here our author aligns fully with Wollstonecraft; however, she does not employ the passion and therefore the provoking rhetoric that Wollstonecraft uses. The ability to reason, a skill valued by both Edgeworth and Wollstonecraft, is not a trait monopolized by the male sex. Reason, sense, and a general control over one’s emotions can indeed be found and therefore nurtured in the female sex as well. To support this idea, Edgeworth not only creates rational female characters such as Anne Percival and Belinda Portman, but she also creates irrational, emotional male characters. Sir Philip Baddely conducts himself in an unreasonable manner—one that Edgeworth would have us attribute to traditional female qualities in order to prove that not all men employ good sense. The first time we meet Sir Philip he is partaking in a hearty round of male gossip. In fact, the band of manly gossipers at Lady Singleton’s party includes Clarence Hervey who later realizes his
ridiculous follies and repents in the name of reason. Sir Philip, on the other hand, is involved in gossip, devious schemes, spying, fist fighting with a servant, and nosing about in other people’s business for the whole of the novel. Sir Philip, by giving in to this type of behavior, is allowing his emotions to fully run his life in place of reason. His character gives Edgeworth and her readers a basis to believe that not all men control their emotions and employ the reason that is purportedly inherent in their sex.

Mr. Vincent also reveals certain qualities below that of the traditional, masculine hero. His propensity to gamble, his “never-failing flow of animal spirits”, and his enthusiasm leads him to be overly “high-spirited and impatient” (218). While these traits lead to Mr. Vincent’s self-banishment, they are not necessarily seen as faults until they extend far beyond his control. But because “his feelings were always more powerful than his reasoning,” his story ends in disgrace. Only when enthusiasm is not regulated by reason does it become a fault. However, the faults of Mr. Vincent may not be exclusively attributed to his sentimentality. Because he is Creole, Edgeworth introduces a new and dangerous justification for Mr. Vincent’s actions and personality. According to the text, Mr. Vincent developed the taste for gambling in the West Indies where his father was too busy acquiring his fortune to properly raise his son as a true gentleman. While Vincent is noted as having a manly appearance due to his dark eyes and sun-burnt complexion, these qualities also mark him as different. Other. Due to his Creole background which, as the novel’s endnote details, does not necessarily infer a specific color or race, but a rather vague problematic racial background, Vincent is
singled out as foreign and consequently, immoral. While his origin is noted, the narrator does not focus heavily on Mr. Vincent’s Creole status within the novel besides some spiteful comments on the part of Lady Delacour. Instead the narrator insists repeatedly that the majority of his faults lie in the fact that he shows “more spirit than temper, and more courage than prudence” (444). But again, while Mr. Vincent does indeed lack reason, he also lacks racial purity—both heavy faults according to the narrator. It may, however, have been easier to dismiss Edgeworth’s racial statement of assigning the title of Creole to a gambling, emotional, suicidal man if it were not for her other blatantly stereotypical characters and her inexcusably racist depictions of them.

Juba, Mr. Vincent’s Jamaican servant, is described as a superstitious, simple, naïve, and ignorant ‘boy’ who is fooled into believing that a drawing is a spirit, who sings and dances and fashions as well as plays instruments, and who is later found “sobb[ing] like an infant” over the departure of his “massa” (449). Juba does not have the powers of reasoning that this novel holds as humanity’s highest virtue, and based on the narrator’s description and account of this character in addition to his accent, his deficiency in the realm of sensibility is attributed to the blackness of his skin. Despite Juba’s advantageous marriage, he does not grow or develop as a character—he has little to no ability to reason and is therefore treated more along the lines of a child or a pet than as a man. The fact that Mr. Vincent’s dog is also named Juba further plunges this text into dangerous waters.

Kirkpatrick’s notes explain that “although the term [Creole] does not denote racially mixed parentage until later, Edgeworth’s description of Mr. Vincent suggests that however ‘pure’ the lineage, once in the setting of the aboriginal, the racial boundaries began to blur” (495). Edgeworth basically posits that his West Indian upbringing alone is enough to call Mr. Vincent’s character into question.
Solomon, who is referred to by his name only once (and the rest of the time as “the Jew”), represents another stereotype: that of the money-lending, unfeeling, unforgiving Jew who is greedy for profit. In the chapter entitled “A Jew,” we are briefly introduced to Solomon as someone who is desperately expedient, exorbitant, and imposing. And if this was not enough, the two marginalized characters (Solomon and Juba) literally and physically battle each other. The narrator writes, “a loud noise was heard...of two people quarreling. It was Juba, the black, and Solomon, the Jew” (446). Edgeworth was in fact reprimanded for her anti-semitic portrayal of Jewish characters and genuinely resolved to make amends, so it hardly seems necessary to comment further on her treatment of the Other in regard to race. However, what Edgeworth does with the language of her Others may be of some note.

*Belinda* is a story set in England and about the English. Therefore, it is quite obvious when an outsider intrudes upon such a homogeneous society based solely on his depicted accent within the text. For example, the skirmish mentioned above between Juba and Solomon is depicted only in regard to their language. Here is where the language of the novel begins to undermine Edgeworth’s themes. The narrator discloses, “each went on talking in their own angry gibberish as loud as they could” (447). The dialects of the Jew and the Jamaican become the focal point of their argument as opposed to the words that they are saying. Solomon’s language, which is only detailed through the narrator, is described as “scarcely intelligible” and Juba is

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16 In both Kirkpatrick’s Introduction to *Belinda* as well as Heidi Thomson’s Introduction to *The Absentee*, the letter from Rachel Mordecai is referenced. Mordecai was a Jewish woman in America who wrote to rebuke Edgeworth regarding her treatment of Jewish characters, and who, in turn, received a heartfelt response, apology, and promise of repentance from Edgeworth.
quoted as saying, “You rob my massa? You dead man, if you rob my massa” (446).

Here, the presence of a foreign accent reveals a difference in race, rationality, and morality from the heroes and heroines of Belinda. As a side note, Edgeworth also presents the peoples of different races and nationalities as unconditionally loyal to their masters—a trait revealed by their dialogue. Juba cannot be separated from Mr. Vincent just as Thady, as we will see in Castle Rackrent, claims unswerving devotion to the Rackrent family.

Class is also established by the accents in Belinda. The first accent on the pages of this novel belongs to Champfort, the Delacours’ man servant. This Frenchman’s accent and word choice indicate his lowly position within the house as well as his foreigner status: “MiLord, de man call to speak about de burgundy you order, milord” (156). The language of the serving class is rough and uncouth, and Edgeworth makes sure to differentiate her characters based on the words they choose to employ as well as their accents. Marriott is Lady Delacour’s personal servant who is English, so is not represented with any sort of accent, but is of the serving class and therefore makes use of her rhetoric in a less dignified manner. Her repertoire consists of phrases such as, “I’ll be burnt” (31) and “I’d sooner cut out my tongue” (160)—phrases neither Lady Delacour, Belinda, nor any woman of a higher class would dare utter based solely on their rank in society. While the dialogue of the high society characters is witty, refined, and revolves around literature and philosophy, the dialogue of the serving class is centered mainly on trivial gossip, household matters, and, in Marriott’s case, her beloved macaw. On the topic of proper language, it is Lady Delacour who is most
qualified to instruct Edgeworth’s readers. She tells her daughter to “speak intelligibly whatever you say, and never leave a sentence unfinished” (171). It is each character’s accent and amount of dialogue in addition to his or her idioms, sentence structure, and topic of choice that indicates class, nationality, and breeding in *Belinda*. Each of these aspects lends an important distinction to the upper-class English characters that Edgeworth, through her narrator, would like to accentuate.

Edgeworth does more than just separate race and class by her employment of accent and dialogue; she divides the moral from the immoral. Belinda begins the novel as Lady Delacour’s protégé but soon finds herself looking beyond the guise dialogue to expose the true moral fiber of those around her. It is male, not female gossip that initially alerts Belinda to the deceptive nature of dialogue. At the masquerade, our heroine finds that not only are faces hidden by masks, but that thoughts, opinions, and intentions are likewise hidden by words. Belinda is unable to be consoled even by Lady Delacour’s sharp raillery after hearing the words of Clarence Hervey and his band of gossipers: “a man must be a novice indeed, that could be taken in at this time of day by a niece of Mrs. Stanhope’s” (24). And when the partying ends and, for the first time, Lady Delacour has no more wit to offer, Belinda sees the pain that hides behind the mask. As all of Lady Delacour’s history comes to light and Belinda learns of her status as an unfit mother, her physical wound, her broken relationship with her husband, her obsession with fashion and society life, and her association with Harriet Freke, Lady Delacour’s way with words takes on a sinister function—her wit is no longer in good fun, but becomes tainted by artful deception. Lady Delacour is under the impression that
the purpose of language is to “conceal your sentiments” (171). But once Belinda realizes that Lady Delacour is not a suitable role model, she makes a “resolution to profit by her bad example”, and indeed, from this point forward, Belinda grows into her function as the rightful heroine by regulating her dialogue and using it only to speak the truth (70).

In the end, Lady Delacour sheds her mask and resolves to live a moral life and so her character is essentially saved. Harriet Freke, on the other hand, is the ultimate example of an immoral character whose faults lie heavily in her usage of language and who does not repent—she remains the antagonist throughout. Harriet Freke occupies the role of the manly woman who is neither respected nor admired for her gender-confused qualities. Just as Belinda is the ideal combination of rationality (masculinity) and sentimentality (femininity), so too does Harriet Freke function as a bridge between genders. However, because she is scolded for her form, coarse language, and manner, we are led to denounce her character as inappropriate. Harriet is described as dashing, frank, impudent, noisy, mad with spirits, and violent among other qualities that are not upheld as desirable in a woman. Dressed as a man and demanding a place alongside them, Harriet verbally and physically plows through Belinda like a whirlwind, laying waste to the lives of both women and men. But eventually the gender boundaries that Harriet breaks literally land her in a trap like the wild animal she is made out to be.

We know that the narrator refers to the manners and dress of Harriet as manly and inappropriate, but it is her rhetoric and excessive amount of dialogue that push her into immorality. We first hear of Harriet from Lady Delacour who exclaims, “Such things
as I have heard Harriet Freke say! You will not believe it; but her conversation at first absolutely made me, like an old fashioned fool, wish I had a fan to play with” (43, emphasis added). We know by Lady Delacour’s own wish to please and entertain that if she is shocked, then Harriet Freke must cross a very distinct and taboo social line. She marks the moral separation between the somewhat radical, sharp-tongued witty female—Lady Delacour—and the indecent and irrecoverable fallen woman. In fact, the narrator points out later when we meet Harriet Freke face to face that she really does not possess any real wit at all, that she only “made odd things pass for wit” and that it was “humour she really possessed; and when she chose it, she could be diverting to those who like buffoonery in women” (227). Edgeworth piles lack of wit on top of grotesque manners on top of dressing in men’s clothes on top of indecent language to create the ultimate female monster—someone who crosses social, gender, and moral boundaries and who, “as a mistress or a wife, no man of any taste could think of” (233). There is one catch to Harriet’s character that cannot be ignored despite the narrator’s vicious portrayal of her, and that is the fact that Harriet Freke is undeniably fashionable. Not only is she fashionable, but she is popular among “a set of fashionable young men” which makes her position in society a desired one by people such as Lady Delacour, who go to great lengths to set the fashionable example. Edgeworth may paint Harriet as the evil of Belinda, but she undercuts such a portrait by making her character desirable to certain members of high society. Harriet functions as Edgeworth’s commentary on the absurdity of the fashionable life, but at the same time, Harriet is her very ticket into such a world. Again we find the disconnect between what Edgeworth would like to
instill in her readers (propriety, morality, and reason) and what she cannot help but
write about (women engaging in duels, scandalous love affairs, and the obsessively
fashionable).

Overall, *Belinda* presents a homogenous society of upper-class Englishmen and
women. Their dialogue with each other indicates their level of morality which is
basically determined by the amount of rationality and sensibility they exercise. But
when any other nationality is introduced—French, Creol, Jamaican, Jew—there is an
accent on the page that is inescapable and glaring. What is more, these accents denote
Otherness either in regard to class or nationality and therefore present a digression in
what Edgeworth presents as appropriate moral behavior. The narrator of *Belinda*
makes certain that these outsiders are ridiculed for their accents and unable to follow
the codes of conduct she establishes in regard to race, class, gender, and morality. *The
Absentee* does not let readers off as easily, however. Our next text deals with
attempting to determine morality when the characters’ nationalities blur or transcend
boundaries.

Chapter Five

*The Absentee and the Question of Nationality*

*The Absentee* is another example of the way in which Edgeworth utilizes accent
and dialogue in order to impart a moral code and to determine nationality as well as
class. Writing in the English language to depict Irishness and Anglo-Irishness gives
Edgeworth the opportunity to highlight or utilize “the importance of accent as a tension
internal to the word” (Deleuze, Guattari 23). It is due to these internal linguistic
tensions that we as readers differentiate between the characters in *The Absentee*. We
come to know each character and what he or she represents by such qualities as the
forced accent of Lady Clonbrony, the loose expressions and storytelling of Sir Terence
O’Fay, the stuttering of Heathcock, the condescension and wit of Mrs. Dareville, the
voicelessness of Grace Nugent, even Lord Colambre’s lack of accent determines his
position in the text. Edgeworth has taken her characters’ speech and created a detailed
cross-section of class, nationality, and gender. She furnishes each individual with
certain linguistic qualities and is thereby able to manipulate these characters for her
ultimate purposes. By using accent and dialogue as pedagogical tools, Edgeworth is able
to use *The Absentee* to uphold three main powers: the hierarchy of the class system, the
colonization of Ireland (or the rule of England over Ireland), and the patriarchal system.
These three issues fall under the umbrella of morality—Edgeworth’s main theme in
writing novels.

In order to determine Edgeworth’s codes of conduct within her textual themes,
one need not go any further in *The Absentee* than the accents of her characters. We will
begin with young Lord Colambre whom we are told is the hero of the tale. Early in the
story we learn through the narrator that Colambre is almost twenty-one and will at that
point in time be considered an adult by his family and by society. This detail prepares us
to expect a coming-of-age tale, a bildungsroman full of lessons learned and maturity
gained. *The Absentee* does fulfill this promise; however, it is not the story of the
individual bildungsroman to which Edgeworth aspires. Colambre—an Irish-born heir to
extensive Irish land and property who was sent to England to be educated at
Cambridge—comes to represent the perfect combination of spirit (Ireland) and sense
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(England). In him, Edgeworth creates the ideal Anglo-Irish balance. The narrator highlights stereotypical Irish qualities alongside stereotypical English qualities by stating, “young and careless though he seemed, Lord Colambre was capable of serious reflection” which not only reveals his hyphenated nationality, but his capacity for maturation as well (5). The combination of youth and spirit coupled with a capacity for thought and reason emphasizes in its simplest form the benefit—or according to Edgeworth the necessity—of the Irish adoption of English attributes. Here is where we ascertain Edgeworth’s ultimate goal: not only to tell the tale of Colambre’s journey into manhood, but to tell the tale of Ireland and England’s connected journeys into nationhood as well.

The main way for Edgeworth to portray and define nationality without making enemies on either side is to create a character who represents one, the other, or in Colambre’s case, multiple nations. But we get less of Colambre’s actual voice than any other major character in The Absentee aside from Grace Nugent. Edgeworth, it seems, cannot afford to have her hero parading around the novel and speaking his mind without some sort of intervention from the narrator. And so the narrator acts as a filter, taking it upon herself to relay to us Colambre’s thoughts and actions in order to ensure our minds are properly molded in the name of all that is moral. The reason for Colambre’s silence is twofold. First, it delivers a powerful image for readers to emulate as opposed to a potentially flawed character. And second, Edgeworth is using Colambre’s silence to comment on the overestimation of language itself just as we saw in Belinda’s character. If we consider the first scene of the novel which is flooded with
the idle talk of gossips and busybodies, it is safe to assume that too many superfluous words are simply not proper whatever one’s nationality. Refraining from partaking in gossip or useless chatter, however, is not enough to render one a hero in Edgeworth’s eyes—a hero must also generally refrain from speaking altogether unless absolutely necessary. And so the narrator limits Colambre’s actual voice on the page to teach her readers that silence is superior to idle chatter.\(^\text{17}\)

Colambre is not completely silent, however. When our hero does speak, his dialogue allows us to observe how this young Lord fulfills his family’s (and society’s) wishes to succeed in becoming the man they need him to be. His character moves from an inarticulate and somewhat bumbling youth to a proud and well-spoken man. At the beginning of the novel when Colambre finds himself dealing with Mordecai for the first time, he proves himself unequal to the task at hand. Toward the end of their exchange, when Mordecai places himself (a tradesman) and Colambre (a gentleman) on equal ground by flippantly saying “between ourselves,” our hero—who has yet to master the ability to speak heroically—finds himself unable to do anything but “move hastily towards the door, and depart” (11). Unable to speak, Colambre storms out like a child throwing a tantrum. And again, when Mr. Soho uses his influence to bully Lady Clonbrony, Colambre finds that he is unable to defend his mother. Colambre just watches, “provoked almost past enduring” yet unwilling and unable to speak up (13). In the same scene when Grace proceeds to gently but skillfully put Mr. Soho in his place,

\(^{17}\) The importance of silence is stressed in all three texts. Belinda Portman and Grace Nugent are silent and therefore moral. And we will find that Thady Quirk in Castle Rackrent is unreliable because he does not exercise silence—his entire tale is one long, semi-unintelligible ramble.
the narrator admits that Colambre was certain that he could never have used the
language that Grace used in such an admirable fashion. Nonetheless, despite our hero's
inarticulate and somewhat inaudible start, he does mature as the novel proceeds. His
voice becomes as strong as his internal emotions and opinions which he was, in youth,
unable to express. Colambre voices his wish to return to Ireland and inspect his father's
land knowing very well that his mother will be more than vexed to hear it. He takes
command at Clonbrony castle by declaring boldly, "I speak in my father's name, for I
know I speak his sentiments," when Old Nick attempts to exercise his cruelty (166). And
by the end of the tale he is taking charge of his father's financial mess and producing
Grace's legitimate past in order to procure his future with her. This is indeed a surface
bildungsroman, but again, Edgeworth is doing more than simply raising a youth from
inarticulate immaturity to authoritative voice. Through Colambre's dialogue, and lack
thereof, we are given a portrait of the ideal man. Colambre's valiant words and deeds
as well as his lack of accent reveal him to be a man that any nation can admire and
esteem. Lord Colambre's faults are attributed to his youthfulness and are therefore
easily forgotten and forgiven when he turns twenty-one and automatically fulfills the
role of honorable son—an accomplishment that is depicted through his ability to master
his own voice.

If Colambre's neutral accent and reserved dialogue represent the perfect
combination of Irishness and Englishness, then his mother is the exact opposite. We
first meet Lady Clonbrony during the infamous gossip scene in chapter one. Edgeworth
accomplishes multiple objectives through the gossip in the first few pages: she
reproaches the English for their snobbery and false manners, she discourages Lady Clonbrony's artificial intrusion "into certain circles," and she creates a barrier of dialogue that cannot be penetrated from the outside as Lady Clonbrony will soon discover (2). During the gossip scene, Mrs. Dareville, the novel's sharp-tongued gossip, takes the opportunity to ridicule Lady Clonbrony for her forced English accent, "you cawnt conceive the peens she teekes to talk of the teebles and cheers, and to thank Q, and with so much teeste to speak pure English" (2), revealing to the reader that not only is Lady Clonbrony attempting to pass for something she is not, she is also positively ashamed of her Irish upbringing. This dismissal of nationality highlighted by the severe but truthful comments—the "slings and arrows" (34)—of Mrs. Dareville is presented as unacceptable by Edgeworth. Lady Clonbrony is an English-born woman who lived in Ireland for most of her life until she and her husband became absentees—landowners who appointed landlords to rule in their stead while living abroad. And although Lady Clonbrony possesses heavy faults, they are presented in a more or less comedic light. Her obsessions with fashion, London society, wealth, marriage, accent, and appearance make her an easy target for ridicule. But in spite of these shortcomings, we learn from Lord Colambre and the narrator that Lady Clonbrony has a warm heart somewhere beneath her ridiculous English obsessions. Colambre describes his mother as having "a naturally free, familiar, good-natured, precipitate, Irish manner" (4).

Since she is English-born it is no wonder that Lady Clonbrony works so hard to be accepted into English class and country—it is a nation in which she feels she rightly has a place. Her time in Ireland, however, has contorted her English accent until she can no
longer pass for English regardless of her birth, and without that coveted English accent, her plans to rise to the top of her newly-found English society go unfulfilled. Lady Clonbrony is Edgeworth’s formula for a failed attempt at a merger between Ireland and England. The endeavor to infiltrate English society fails so miserably that Lady Clonbrony is convinced despite herself to move back home to Ireland. The ultimate reason for her failure to assimilate with English society is her accent: Lady Clonbrony attempts to sound English and is detested and ridiculed for it. If dialect or accent “arises...only along with the development of nations” as Stephen Barbour speculates (13), then the difference between the sound of Lady Clonbrony’s voice and that of Mrs. Dareville’s (the token English woman) is an irreversible and irreconcilable national difference. Barbour also views language as a tool—one that manipulates nationalism by upholding, reinforcing, reviving, or deconstructing it. I would add that Edgeworth takes this notion one step further to argue that it was not ideal for these two separate nations to merge. Instead she strongly states that the Irish and the Anglo-Irish should stay in Ireland where they belong and leave England for the English: “it’s growing the fashion not to be an Absentee” (256). Because *The Absentee* ends with the return of the entire Anglo-Irish family to Ireland, we learn that Edgeworth values the separation between one nation and another. It is no wonder Edgeworth struggles with where to place the Anglo-Irish—they are seemingly without a nation.

Although we may criticize Lady Clonbrony for attempting to be someone she is not, we do not do so without some sense of pity and embarrassment for her outlandish English accent and her absurd comments. Like Colambre, we recognize the war that
wages within Lady Clonbrony. Colambre easily balances his Irish spirit with his English sense, but his mother, on the other hand, is unable to be at peace with either nation. Colambre’s education has afforded him a prized English-sounding accent which comes naturally to him, but Lady Clonbrony struggles to mask her Irishness with a false accent as a means of controlling the way in which other characters view her. We are told that Lady Clonbrony has “a strong Hibernian accent [which she], with infinite difficulty, changed into an English tone” (5). And although she tries in vain to present herself as English, all the other characters, especially her own son, see straight through her. Here is a painful example of Lady Clonbrony’s attempt at assimilation: “I big your pawdon, Colambre; surely I, that was born in England, an Henglishwoman bawn, must be well infawmed on this pint, any way” (15). We also learn that her accent comes and goes when she is being sincere which tells us that the comfortable Lady Clonbrony is indeed Irish. The narrator relates that Lady Clonbrony’s inner Irishwoman emerges when she is passionate enough to forget about being English:

[Lady Clonbrony cried] in an undisguised Irish accent, and with her natural warm manner. But, a moment afterwards, her features and whole form resumed their constrained stillness and stiffness, and in her English accent she continued. (16)

Colambre calls this act of deception a “renegado cowardice” in which Lady Clonbrony abuses Ireland to gain favor in England, but only manages to gain “nothing but ridicule and contempt” (5). For those Irish or Anglo-Irish peoples who cannot assimilate into English society such as Lady Clonbrony, Edgeworth’s suggestion is to leave England altogether.
Presented in direct contrast to Lady Clonbrony is the Irish Lady Oranmore, also living in England. During a dinner party, Lady Clonbrony, “possessed by the idea that it was disadvantageous to appear as an Irishwoman,” proceeds to abuse her country and, in every way possible, remove herself from such a despicable association. After Lady Clonbrony’s “vow of perpetual expatriation” which only succeeds in embarrassing and shaming her, Lady Oranmore gives an eloquent and heart-felt defense of Ireland. Not only are the other English guests at the table respectful of Lady Oranmore, they are sympathetic and even admiring. Here, Edgeworth presents the English as a reasonable and accepting people who judge not based on national merits or accent, but honesty and zeal. It is essential that Edgeworth present Lady Clonbrony as an embarrassment not only to herself and to her family, but also to the English society she wants so desperately to be a part of. The lesson Edgeworth would wish us to learn is that no matter how hard one tries, one cannot become part of a separate nation by disowning one’s inherent nationality (56-7).

Edgeworth uses the accent and dialogue of Lady Clonbrony not just as a lesson on national pride, but familial roles as well. Her husband, Lord Clonbrony, likewise serves as an extension of Edgeworth’s views on patriarchy and the importance of a cohesive nuclear family led by a male presence. Lord Clonbrony is an Anglo-Irish landowner who has unwillingly left his Irish estate for England. His first mistake was giving up his position as head of the family by allowing his wife to move the entire family out of Ireland and into England. But unlike his wife, Lord Clonbrony’s faults are not against his nation. Instead, Edgeworth accuses him of being a despondent husband who
puts himself into extreme debt and his family in danger in order to appease his wife. Lord Clonbrony is described as a “cipher...looked down upon by the fine people” of London. But he is aware of his new and lowly status in English society and proceeds to actively seek the companionship of the lower class in which he can once again feel “himself the first person in company” (21). We know, however, that Lord Clonbrony was a decent man based on his Irish tenants who regret his absence and claim that “if he was not away, he’d be a good gentleman” (148). We know too, by the return of the Clonbronys to Ireland, that Edgeworth condemns absenteeism. Therefore, based on Lord Clonbrony’s abandonment of country, family, and financial responsibility—actions the narrator clearly condemns—we are meant to understand that the father is and should remain the head and protector of the family. Without a man to make moral and responsible decisions, his entire family is subject to ruin.

In order to use Lord Clonbrony in support of patriarchy, the narrator must first portray him as incapable and then restore him to his proper place—this is done once again through dialogue as Lord Clonbrony seems to suffer from the same inarticulateness as his son. Twice when Colambre brings up financial matters to his father, Lord Clonbrony blushes and fumbles as opposed to verbally addressing his son. We are told that “Lord Clonbrony seem[s] more embarrassed” when Colambre voices his displeasure about a marriage, refraining from addressing his son reasonably and in the fashion of a respectable father (18). Again, on the next page we find Lord Clonbrony uneasy, “moving continually, and shifting from leg to leg, like a foundered horse” when Colambre attempts to discuss financial matters with him. In fact, the father of our hero
could not even “bring himself positively to deny that he had debts” let alone discuss them with his son (19). The lack of speech presented here in Lord Clonbrony signifies a familial and patriarchal transgression as well as a national one in the sense that he is unable to speak on behalf of his role as father, man, and Anglo-Irishman. As the father of the household, Lord Clonbrony should be a respectable, commanding, active, responsible, articulate, and admired man. In all of these areas, however, the father of our hero falls short. In England, Lord Clonbrony finds himself catering to his wife’s ridiculous demands, moving closer and closer to financial ruin, associating with less-than-upstanding men, owing money to lenders, and ultimately unable to provide for and protect his family. This was not the case when Lord Clonbrony was master of his estates in Ireland, however. The fall of his domain comes only after Lord Clonbrony emigrates to England. Therefore, it cannot simply be Lord Clonbrony’s absenteeism that Edgeworth scorns; it is the fact that this man cannot live up to his patriarchal role in life—a role that Edgeworth devotes much of her energy defending in *The Absentee*. Lord Clonbrony becomes more than just a poor example of an Anglo-Irish landowner; he becomes a poor example of a father, a husband, and a man. It is Lord Clonbrony’s fallen patriarchy, and therefore his manhood, that his son is forced to restore in the end.

As the introduction by Heidi Thomas affirms, Maria Edgeworth’s purpose in writing *The Absentee* was not to propose an equal “union between an Irish heroine and an Anglo-Irish hero” but to create a proper hierarchy in which the Anglo-Irish can “be present in and involved with the place which they rule” (xxv). As such, Edgeworth must depict her Anglo-Irish characters in such a way that reveals their shortcomings, suggests
their capacity for moral improvement, and then rectifies any past wrongs, thus creating an ideal model for the Anglo-Irish race and the classes they represent. The Clonbrony family, including Lord Colambre and Grace Nugent, is the family that Edgeworth sets up as the ultimate example of a moral, landowning, Anglo-Irish family but not without first exposing, through their accents and dialogue, their individual flaws.

If “every text has a space within it for the Other, for opposition, for obstacle,” (Backscheider 8) Grace Nugent undoubtedly fills that space. The obstacle in question is Grace’s legitimacy. Grace’s only fault—if it can be called such—is her questionable lineage. Beyond that, she embodies all that a stereotypical and proper woman should. Grace’s value is placed exclusively upon being beautiful, young, delicate, soft, loving, angelic, and above all silent. And although her “fault” is beyond her control, to be an illegitimate child is a fault egregious enough to sever any hope regarding a future life with Lord Colambre. Grace’s fault is not a character flaw like those of Lord and Lady Clonbrony, nor is it due to youth like Colambre’s. Instead, it is completely beyond her power. And yet the second half of the book is devoted to it—its importance is paramount. But once the truth is revealed and Grace has the good fortune to possess legitimate parents, she is released of her burden and becomes instantly worthy of Lord Colambre. Like Lord Colambre, Grace is defined not through her language or accent (she has none), but through her almost total lack of dialogue within the text. Grace is silent not because she is immature like Colambre or inept like Lord Clonbrony (both are able to rectify themselves before the end of the tale), but because it is her place as a woman, her moral obligation, to be so. And unlike the men who eventually and actively...
take on their appropriate societal roles by learning to wield their voices, Grace must
remain a model of proper femininity by abstaining from using hers. Grace’s
voicelessness calls to mind Belinda—both women who are rewarded by advantageous
marriages after proving they are able to keep silent.

We get to know Grace mainly through Colambre’s eyes. Therefore, it is not the
actual character we are seeing but the representation of a woman through the male
gaze. Our first encounter with Grace depicts her, through Colambre’s description,
defending his mother with “propriety and delicacy” (13). However, we are not actually
allowed to hear (or read) a single word of Grace’s defense. In fact, we are not permitted
to read any of Grace’s actual dialogue until page twenty-five. Here Grace speaks, but
again her dialogue does not appear on the page, and we are forced to take the
narrator’s word that she is charmingly eloquent: “the unconscious Grace Nugent now
made a warm eulogy of miss Broadhurst’s sense, and wit, and independence of
character” (25). Then finally, a few lines later, Grace’s voice appears on the page for the
first time in the novel. Her words are simple and confident as she speaks with an
assured strength, and yet, Grace uses her first words on the page to promise that she
will speak no more:

‘She is, I assure you, a friend of mine; and, as a proof, I will not praise her at this
moment. I will go farther still—I will promise that I never will praise her to you
till you begin to praise her to me’. (25, emphasis added)

Grace willingly gives her voice as an Irish woman over to Colambre by silencing herself.
The argument to be made in regard to gender is that the woman volunteers her silence
in submission to her male counterpart. And the narrator praises Grace for this restraint:
“Grace was too good a friend to comply with that request; she left Miss Broadhurst to unfold her own character” (29).

Without any noticeable accent and with minimal dialogue, Grace Nugent represents a silenced nation as well as a silenced gender simply because she is an Irish woman. We find early on in the story through Lady Clonbrony that Grace would not give up her last name, Nugent, for Nogent. The change in name would have called to mind French associations as opposed to Irish ones and (again according to Lady Clonbrony) would have bettered Grace’s reputation in English society. Because Grace has not only an Irish name, but “a tincture of Irish pride” (16), we are informed that she is not married and will not be forced into such a state. Grace also defends Ireland to Lady Clonbrony further associating herself with that nation:

I meant to say that Ireland had been a friend to me: that I found Irish friends, when I had no other; an Irish home, when I had no other; that my earliest and happiest years, under your kind care, had been spent there; and I can never forget that, me dear aunt.... (71)

While Grace represents Ireland for most of the novel, we learn at the very end that both of her parents were actually English: her father was “a young English officer...a gentleman of the name of Reynolds” and her mother was “a very young English lady, who had been educated at a convent in Vienna” (218). It is not only this revelation of legitimacy, but also nationality that rectifies Grace’s status in Colambre’s eyes making her an eligible marriage partner. Only after he learns that her parents “had been privately married” (218) does her one flaw dissolve and her life become valuable again. Also, throughout the entire text, Grace is the only main character who does not change. Edgeworth, through her narrator’s comments and Grace’s continued morality despite
her change in nationality, is teaching her readers that morality can indeed transcend nationality. Grace began as Irish and ended as English. Colambre was mistaken in the beginning for an Englishman “by his manner” but was then revealed to have been born in Ireland (3). Lord Clonbrony is an Anglo-Irishman who feels more at home in Ireland than England, and his wife, Lady Clonbrony, is an Englishwoman who moved to Ireland but would rather be perceived as English. In Belinda, any character with a detectable accent was considered Other, foreign, not of the British nation. But in The Absentee, the idea of nationality and even nationhood becomes blurred; borders are crossed and twisted, characters occupy multiple lands. In the words of Esther Wohlgemut, Edgeworth may interpret Anglo-Irishness “less as a category than as an ongoing mediation between borders” (645). In Grace’s moral stability throughout the text despite her apparent national identity crisis, Edgeworth moves away from an insistence on nationality to focus her energy on “cosmopolitan constructions of universal human subjects” (Wohlgemut 647).

With regard to the accent and dialogue of the text, The Absentee becomes an interpretation of the function of the Anglo-Irish, a people who were essentially intended to “interven[e] between the imperial mother-country and the colonized native peoples” (Cleary 115). Essentially, The Absentee blurs borders in order to permit peoples of multiple and different nations the potential for morality. This was not an option in Belinda as the main characters were all of one nation, but it seems Edgeworth has given more thought to the superficiality of national allegiance in the sense that only one nation can be inherently moral. To move forward from here, we must look backward to
Castle Rackrent where we will encounter again the problem of nationality, only amplified. But instead of making value judgments for us, Edgeworth simply presents Castle Rackrent, challenging us to sort out the Anglo-Irish question regarding nationality and morality on our own. Based on these three novels considered chronologically, Edgeworth seems to grow in didacticism while becoming less and less certain about the role of nationality—as her insistence on morality heightens, her ability to define national identity declines. Perhaps creating infallible codes of conduct became more challenging as her career progressed. Consider her first novel, Castle Rackrent, which is totally void of any moral message but presents clear distinctions between the Irish and the Anglo-Irish (or possibly English). Next, Belinda provides a narrator to guide readers safely along a moral path—something Rackrent lacked. Still, Belinda, like Castle Rackrent, is a relatively clear depiction of nationality (until we look again at the character of Mr. Vincent in particular who begins to blur boundaries). And finally, The Absentee is more didactic than the others, but the once clear-cut issue of nationality gets continually turned upon itself. The reason this thesis considers Castle Rackrent out of turn is due to its absolute divergence from Belinda and The Absentee. To begin a discussion of proper conduct with a text that skips over the issue completely does not seem prudent. Moreover, despite—or perhaps on account of—Rackrent’s clearly-drawn national lines, this novel is the most extreme in its use of accent, dialogue, and idiom and presents the most complex account on which our discussion of language hinges.
Chapter 6

Castle Rackrent: English Language vs. Irish Brogue

As we saw in The Absentee, Colambre’s character is able to exemplify both Irish and English attributes simultaneously and without conflict. Grace is another character who highlights the importance of morality over the distinction of nationality. Castle Rackrent, however, is wildly different as this novel is not overpowered or interfered with by the moralizing narrator that occupies both Belinda and The Absentee. Instead, we find that this novel has more than one narrator—and neither seems wholly concerned with the reader’s moral welfare. As it was the practice in Ireland to sublet land through a middleman, so too “the absentee author of Castle Rackrent sublets her text to the Editor, who in turn sublets it to an Irish narrator who further subdivides it” (Glover 295). And as we will find, the battle between the Irish narrator, Thady, and the Editor represents the divergence between Ireland and England as political nations, physical lands, and diverging languages. The rival narrators serve “to contest the dominant values of metropolitan, capitalist society, particularly its simplistic, nostalgic idealizations of rural life” (Bohrer 395), allowing Edgeworth to ridicule the English for their perception of the Irish and ridicule the Irish for epitomizing those English perceptions. The Editor’s Preface and Glossary in addition to Thady’s story become interwoven—inseparable—and permit Edgeworth to create a multi-tiered commentary that crosses borders. This unguarded and confrontational language of Castle Rackrent separates it from Edgeworth’s later novels, which do not attempt to leave the house without a chaperone, so to speak. Castle Rackrent is the most complex of the three texts discussed in this thesis precisely because Edgeworth refrains from commenting
directly on any issues, leaving her readers to fend without the guidance of a didactic storyteller. The reasons for the omission of moralizing in this text as opposed to her future novels may be attributed to many things, but can still only be speculated upon.

Perhaps the weight of her father’s influence caused Edgeworth to adopt, in her later novels, a narrator whose function would be to enforce proper codes of conduct.

Perhaps this first novel was experimental, and it would not be until Belinda that Edgeworth would find her preferred authorial voice. Perhaps Edgeworth looked on Castle Rackrent as too comedic, too controversial, and sought to fashion her later fiction around upholding propriety instead of scoffing at it.

Marking the beginning of Edgeworth’s career in fiction, Castle Rackrent is often favored among readers for the very freedom from her later didacticism as mentioned above. However, if we look closely, we will find as Gerry Brookes does, that there are heavy and looming moral and social lessons to be learned buried beneath the comic language of the narrator, Thady Quirk and his overpowering Editor (593). Edgeworth’s Editor introduces his readers to Thady, a “foolishly loyal servant” who is “naïve and superstitious” (Egenolf 847) and moreover, unreliable as a narrator. Thady begins the Rackrent memoirs discussing himself: “I have always been known by no other name than ‘honest Thady’,” he says. But in the same sentence he admits, “I remember to hear them calling me ‘old Thady,’ and now I’ve come to ‘poor Thady’”; and later (still the same sentence) he goes into an explanation as to why he is called ‘poor Thady’: “for I wear a long great coat winter and summer, which is very handy, as I never put my arms

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18 As Susan Glover points out, “the unnamed Editor [is male because he] refers to ‘his’ readers of the novel” (297).
into the sleeves...” (13). By claiming he has only one name (which, ironically, is ‘honest’), Thady undermines his own reliability both in terms of how he presents himself and how others perceive him. Such an unpredictable character is not permitted sole claim to the text. Edgeworth assigns a second guide to *Castle Rackrent*—an Editor—who is knowledgeable, intelligible, well-spoken, and functions as the self-proclaimed interpreter of Thady’s Irish idioms. The Editor begins Thady’s tale with an apologetic introduction: “the author of the following Memoirs has upon these grounds fair claims to the public favour and attention; he was an illiterate old steward, whose partiality to the family...must be obvious” (8). The Editor also appears after Thady’s account has been told. His unnecessarily-extensive glossary weakens Thady’s narrative with constant interruptions, rendering the Irishman’s tale all the more unreliable. It is here—where Thady and the Editor vie for words on the page—that the battle for power between Ireland and England surfaces.

To view the relationship between the Editor of *Castle Rackrent* and the narrator, Thady, as a struggle for power, one must assign each man a separate nation. Thady, based solely on his accent and idioms, represents Ireland. The Editor, who just happens to be well-versed in all things Irish and who also possesses the ability to relate to and communicate with respectable English readers, seems Anglo-Irish. He has no accent, unlike Thady, so he is put in place as a translator, a way for English or non-Irish or non Anglo-Irish readers to comfortably navigate a text that may otherwise be either incomprehensible or improper. Through his lack of accent and the rhetoric he uses to address his readers, it would not be unreasonable to assume that the possibly Anglo-
Irish Editor wishes to be considered English. If that is the case, then the Anglo-Irish Editor, in his desire to sever his Irishness, assumes power over the Irish narrator. A battle ensues between the two men for what Susan Glover refers to as the “claims of possession” (296).

Glover argues that the Editor and Thady each attempt to possess the text, representing the battle for land that raged between England and Ireland; in fact, Glover “reads land and text as homologous” (296). The Editor introduces Thady’s story by stating, “nations, as well as individuals, gradually lose attachment to their identity, and the present generation is amused, rather than offended, by the ridicule that is thrown upon its ancestors” as a way to justify as well as apologize for Thady’s tale and the manner in which he tells it (9). But this line also exposes the Editor’s cynical admittance of what ultimately happens to national identity over time—it dissolves. National identity dissolves not alone, however, but in the presence of another, more powerful, nation. Of course the Editor would want his readers to believe that Thady’s national identity will soon, under England’s rule, become obsolete and laughable because then he will have won the battle for text and land. Edgeworth’s Editor is nothing short of a colonizer, placing his English language atop or in lieu of Thady’s Irish dialect (Greenblatt 23) in the hope of erasing a “minor” nationality. At the end of the Preface, the Editor even admits, “when Ireland loses her identity by an union with Great Britain, she will look back, with a smile of good-humoured complacency, on the Sir Kits and Sir Condys of her former existence” (9). The Editor not only assumes that Ireland

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19 The Act of the Union that created the United Kingdom by merging Ireland with England took place in 1800—the year Castle Rackrent was published (Hack 145).
will shed her identity, but that she will do so with a "good-humoured complacency"—an assumption bordering on audacity. The struggle for power that the two voices within the text illustrate is summarized by Daniel Hack:

Edgeworth's project, then, is quintessentially Anglo-Irish: her novel works to install a system whereby an ongoing process of Union gives the Anglo-Irish a place and English fear of the duplicity and sheer unreadability of the Irish gives them a function. The Anglo-Irish, in short, feed off the very anxiety of empire Castle Rackrent feeds. (148)

Based on the text, it is unclear whom—the Irish or the English—Edgeworth would have win the battle for text, land, nationality. Being Anglo-Irish herself, "her attitude toward Union was not a simple one" (Hack 149). The Editor does succeed in owning the first and the last words of the text, interrupting Thady's story consistently, and utilizing a proper and sophisticated rhetoric to cajole and convince the reader of his authority. His speculations on philosophy and biography, on heroism and genre are eloquent and convincing. He uses words like "incontestable proof", "superior wisdom", "authenticated", "greatest probability", and "just estimate" to secure his readers' allegiance (7). And to justify his rightful place in the novel he writes,

that the ignorant may have their prejudices as well as the learned cannot be disputed; but we see and despise vulgar errors: we never bow to the authority of him who has no great name to sanction his absurdities. (8)

Although unspoken, it is understood that the one who "has no great name" refers to Thady who is to momentarily—or regrettably according to the Editor—assume the position of power as the storyteller. The only reason the Editor provides for allowing Thady to "sanction his absurdities" is because "the authenticity of his story would have been more exposed to doubt if it were not told in his own characteristic manner" (9).
The Editor regrets that "the ignorant English reader" may have difficulty understanding this text because "Thady's idiom is incapable of translation" (9). But even as the Editor insists that Thady's language is incomprehensible, he nevertheless promises to interpret it. As such, the narrator becomes Thady's chaperone—one who is able to validate him to the rest of the world and make sense of his foreign idioms.

The Editor's Preface promises a story told by an incompetent Irishman that sets up the master/servant dichotomy between the Editor and Thady. To back this claim up, the Editor makes certain to trespass in Thady's tale often and usually unnecessarily. There is a Glossary comprised of thirty entries scattered throughout the novel ranging from one line to four pages. The Glossary is created by the Editor, but there are also footnotes that accompany the text which resemble the rhetoric and style of the Glossary and yet are not claimed by the Editor. Both the Glossary and the footnotes include definitions, anecdotes, justifications, explanations, etc. For example, Glossary entry 'X' is a factual and useful definition which simply reads: "The cant—the auction" (77). But Glossary entry 'Y' is over three pages long, it is more opinion than fact, and it smacks of contempt. The entry commences with the Editor's attitude on the gambling nature of the law in the minds of the Irish: "but almost every poor man in Ireland, be he farmer, weaver, shopkeeper, or steward, is, besides his other occupations, occasionally a lawyer" (77). Then he remarks on the value of time: "It is impossible to convince [the Irish] that time is money. They do not set any value upon their own time, and they think that others estimate theirs at less than nothing" (77). From there, the Editor illustrates the importance of storytelling and concludes with an illustration of such storytelling
which becomes a smallish novel in itself (78-80). This entry is not unique—there are several entries resembling this one. And they do not produce the effects intended by the Editor. Instead of recommending him to his readers as one who is objectively translating Thady’s story for the sake of history and biography, the Glossary reveals the Editor to be as long-winded and subjective as Thady himself. The Editor and Thady (England and Ireland respectively), it would seem, have more in common than not. Wanting to be English but betrayed by his long-winded rhetoric and knowledge of all things Irish, the Editor reminds us of Lady Clonbrony who wanted desperately to be English but was unable to conquer her Irish accent. The label Anglo-Irish denotes, in both cases, a lack of affiliation, or at least an inability to claim one or the other.

Indeed, Thady makes the same sort of rhetorical claims to the text that the Editor does—he uses his words to obtain power. However, Thady uses his words furtively to undermine the Editor and therefore the Anglo-Irish. He does not try to appeal to the reader’s sense and powers of reasoning like the Editor—instead he simply tells his own story, falling into his idioms and happily undercutting the family Rackrent from within. We find that Thady’s story makes no attempt to apologize for or even explain the goings on of the succession of property in the family Rackrent. He is there to relay a story in the customary Irish style, “out of the face, that is, from beginning to end, without interruption” as the Editor reveals in the Glossary (78). But Thady may not be the innocent bystander who serves only to tell a story. Scholars still debate whether Thady possesses an “astuteness [that] lies largely concealed” or whether he is “an observer merely” (Glover 299). Above we dissected the sentence in which Thady tells us
his "only" name, then contradicts himself in the very same sentence to reveal his other names, then goes on to describe the coat that earned him one of those nicknames. This is only the second sentence of Thady's story, yet already we have reason to doubt that he is valid—or we have reason to trust that he is cunning. There are more examples of the narrator's hypocrisy. On the one hand, he praises his first master, Sir Patrick, for being a generous man greatly loved and admired while simultaneously revealing his propensity to drink which led to his death. And, as Glover points out, Thady's sarcasm is evident when he says, "I'm sure I love to look upon [Sir Patrick's] picture, now opposite me" but proceeds to describe him as "a portly gentleman" with a short neck and "the largest pimple on his nose" (14). Examples of Thady's elusive rhetoric abound throughout Castle Rackrent. On several occasions he reveals his desire for gossip: "I got the first sight of the bride...I held the flam full in her face to light her"; "so I left her to herself, and went straight down to the servants' hall to learn something for certain about her" (23); "I could scarcely believe my own eyes" (45) etc. But scattered throughout the story are Thady's constant claims of refraining from speech: "but I said nothing at all" and "I had no more to say" (35); "but I said nothing for fear of gaining myself ill-will" (41); "it was hard to be talking ill of my own" (45). It seems impossible that a man so knowledgeable about all details of the Rackrents, someone so interested in gossip that he is able to tell such a thorough account, is able to hold his tongue on so many occasions. In fact, if Thady did not say anything at all, then this very story would not have been possible. These are the ways in which Thady's status as a reliably loyal servant of the Rackrents is compromised. He does not openly battle with the Editor for
possession of the text, but he does remove all stops when detailing the embarrassing
details of the Rackrents whom he is purportedly very fond of “and loyal to” (13).

The rhetoric of Thady and the Editor brings us again to the question of Union.
Does Edgeworth write *Castle Rackrent* in support of Union with England or does her text
oppose it? Beyond Thady’s (somewhat sarcastic) comments to the Editor, or
middleman, such as “long life to him!” (14) and “please your honour’s honour” (85) he
does not openly contest the Editor—essentially Thady gains his own sort of power by
ignoring the Editor’s overshadowing presence. The Editor, however, writes for the
purpose of exposing the shortcomings of Thady and, for the most part, goes about the
Preface and the Glossary in a sardonic tone. One gains control through disregard, the
other through appropriation. *Castle Rackrent* continues in this give-and-take struggle
for power until the very last pages. The story ends with Thady’s own son, Jason,
swindling Sir Condy out of his money and his estate, much to the horror of our narrator.
Daniel Hack understands that in consideration of this ending, the text “votes in favor of
Union but makes it inconceivable” (150) based on the actions of Thady’s son. And
without the moralizing narrator that Edgeworth utilizes in *Belinda* and *The Absentee*, we
are simply left to decide for ourselves what and who came out victorious: England or
Ireland, the Editor or Thady, the union of two nations or their separation.

*Castle Rackrent* is an example of a text in which Edgeworth wholly refrains from
inserting herself. The dialogue between her two narrators, Thady and the Editor,
becomes the driving force of the text, allowing Edgeworth to decline her usual position
as moralizer and watch as the battle for text and land and power ensues. Without the
narrator speaking directly to the reader defining who is moral and who is not, we find a completely different text from the novels of Belinda and The Absentee—a text that is not a conduct book but a literary discourse that, in this case, has no definitive answer. As we see in the dialogue between the Editor and Thady, “the unity of a literary language is not a unity of a single, closed language system, but is rather a highly specific unity of several ‘languages’” and it is “precisely this [that] constitutes the peculiar nature of the methodological problem in literary language” (Bakhtin 295). The “problem” of Castle Rackrent as Bakhtin would see it, occurred when two languages (dialects) competed for authority within one text and succeeded in influencing each other without full abdication of one or the other. In fact, the Editor can only be the Editor in the company of Thady because, “one language can, after all, see itself only in the light of another language” (Bakhtin 12). Perhaps the Editor and Thady, like England and Ireland, necessitate each other in order to fully realize their distinctions and to occupy specific and relative roles.

Conclusion

**Corresponding Tensions**

We have seen Edgeworth’s insistence on a nationality-based morality in Belinda give way to a less rigid system of classification based on personal merit as opposed to nationality in The Absentee. We have also seen that her earlier work, Castle Rackrent, attempted to function without the moralizing narrator—a style that Edgeworth abandoned for the remainder of her literary career. However, there are strings which connect all three works rendering the texts more similar than not.
The first parallel is the rhetoric of genre that Edgeworth employs to move her fiction away from the reputation of the novel genre. Edgeworth claims that Belinda and The Absentee are moral tales and that Castle Rackrent is a memoir. To claim such labels is one thing, but it is clear that Edgeworth is writing novels. By disavowing and even criticizing the novel genre only to partake in its pleasures creates tension. The second tension that connects all three texts lies in Edgeworth's use of accent and dialogue. When an accent appears on the page, the reader is immediately aware that there is a digression of story, nationality, class, and morality. And the amount of dialogue assigned to each character reveals his or her proper place in society. Belinda and The Absentee present the lower classes as unrefined, the immoral characters as vocal and witty, and the proper upper-class characters as reserved in their speech. And Castle Rackrent uses language to symbolize power as Edgeworth pits one all-knowing English or Anglo-Irish Editor against a talkative Irishman.

The comedic rhetoric that Edgeworth employs is another aspect that connects her novels and creates tension. Belinda and The Absentee are filled with gossiping old ladies, overtly macho young men, irrational Lady Clonbronys, and outlandish Harriett Frekes, while Castle Rackrent participates in a more subtle linguistic comedy—satire and irony. But for these novels to be nothing more than platforms for the author to touch upon the entertaining aspects of propriety in general without producing cohesive morals, lessons, or themes is highly unlikely. If "one ridicules in order to forget" (Bakhtin 23), then it behooves us to keep in mind that although the language of these characters and narrators may be humorous, the colonization of Ireland that each text
Lockard 73

touches upon in some way or another is serious and real. Brookes reads these novels as a way for Edgeworth to:

...provoke a peculiar combination of laughter at and pity for the predicament of these Irish landlords and their tenants and, at the same time, to make the reader see the causes of that predicament in the mental and moral confusion of the Irish which is...encouraged by the degenerate social system they have inherited. (595)

If comedy was viewed in the eighteenth century as a way to disrupt social order, as Audrey Bilger suggested, then Edgeworth was essentially utilizing the disrupting powers of comedy to comment on an already deteriorating Irish social system. “Once laughter constituted an identifiable threat to the social order,” writes Bilger, “female laughter [or the use of comedy in the written works of women] came to be seen as a menace to society’s very foundations” (16). It does not suffice to read Edgeworth simply as a pawn of her father or the champion of the patriarchy or even the authority on morality and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conduct. Because Edgeworth is a woman who dips her pen into the ink of sarcasm, comedy, wit, she immediately becomes a transgressor, a rebel, a revolutionary. And so despite all of her attempts to distance herself from the notorious novel genre, to lead her fiction into society by a male hand, to write in favor of the ruling upper class and the ruling English nation, to reinforce the proper conduct for men, women, and the nuclear family, Edgeworth, in the end, undermines her own agenda through the many aspects of language within her texts. In regard to construing Edgeworth’s novels, one scholar notes that her complicated life and works go far beyond straightforward, one-sided interpretations. Even historians, he writes, “tend to fall into three kinds of error [when discussing
Edgeworth]—the facile generalization that tends to be meaningless or inexact, an irrelevant emphasis on the influence of the author’s father, or the undiscriminating selection of some detail to give a show of authority” (Newcomer 215). Here is where considering the codes of conduct which Edgeworth would like her readers to adopt creates a more holistic, but no less complex and tension-filled, account of her works.

The main tension that lingers between the lines of Edgeworth’s texts emerges when considering her didactic themes in relation to her use of rhetoric, accent, and dialogue. With such topics as the education of women, the Irish rebellion, national identity, the patriarchy, propriety, etc., it becomes impossible for Edgeworth to remain the subservient female she promotes in her texts. By writing and publishing novels, Edgeworth herself defies what she posits as the ideal female. It is through the language of her characters—their accents, dialogue, idioms—the rhetoric of her texts, and the use of the English language “deformed” by Irish and other dialects that Edgeworth posits these radical themes, attempts to define nationality, and asserts her own authority. Bakhtin writes that language “represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth” (291). This contradiction brought about by the overlapping and intermingling languages of the characters and narrators in Edgeworth’s fiction is the reason not only for her conflicting nature but for her success as an author as well. Edgeworth weaves the dialects of Ireland and England with the rhetoric of fiction, fashion, politics, class, family, religion, and more to create socially-charged
commentaries about what she believes is essential for maintaining individual morality. Her attempts to distance herself from being labeled as revolutionary were both unsuccessful and successful. Edgeworth was unsuccessful in the sense that the very language (in all its forms and applications) of her novels undermines her ultimate themes. And yet at the same time, Edgeworth was successful in the sense that her novels were popular during her own life, making for a lucrative career as a writer. Perhaps it is the very culmination of didactic themes, subversive wit, and the tension of language that popularized Edgeworth’s nineteenth-century novels. In the end, whatever the reason for her success as a minor author, Edgeworth effectively and lucratively “expropriate[s] [language], forcing it to submit to [her] own intentions” which, according to Bakhtin, “is a difficult and complicated process” (294).
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