

THE AUTHOR AND THE READER – “US AND THEM” IN MARIA
EDGEWORTH’S TEXTS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS

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ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to tackle the hyphenated self of Maria Edgeworth as Anglo-Irish writer in her books for children and young adults, reflected not only in the fact of the occasional introduction of Irish characters or Irish setting but also at the deeper level of the identity of the narrative voice and the implied reader of these texts. It attempts to show that the Anglo/Irish ratio in the narrative voice of Edgeworth’s texts is a fluctuating value, defining itself in the opposition to the implied reader, whose identity is in turn constantly changing sides as well, hovering between the poles of “us” and “them”.

Maria Edgeworth’s texts for children attract an increasing critical attention nowadays, when pre-Victorian texts for children written by such authors as Hannah More, Anna Laetitia Barbauld and Maria Edgeworth are re-discovered by critics who read them not as examples of grinding Enlightenment didacticism but as, for instance, “subtle rewriting and personalizing of moral tale conventions” which “illuminates themes central to Georgian female life and to contemporary feminist critique as well” (Myers 1991: 98). While the attention of previous critics was focused mostly on the anecdotal aspects of Edgeworth’s life (her father’s pedagogical experiments on his own children or the famous library where Edgeworth wrote and her numerous siblings, and later nephews and nieces tumbled about) (Myers 1994: 58), the contemporary criticism is concentrated around the discussion of Edgeworth’s texts for children and the social and political issues they are involved with.

An encyclopaedic label often applied to Maria Edgeworth – that is, that of an “Anglo-Irish writer” describes in a quite accurate way the problematical position occupied by Edgeworth which situates her across the political, social and

religious divide. Maria Edgeworth, the descendant of the Elizabethan settlers, belonged to this curious class of people who felt they owed their allegiance both to Great Britain and to Ireland. Edgeworth's writings are hailed as one of the first examples of Irish regional writing, crucial in shaping the Irish national identity. This paper attempts to analyze the national identity of Edgeworth's Irish characters in her texts for young readers, the identity of the narrator and that of the implied reader or target audience. The close reading of these texts shows that the impression of Edgeworth's being an advocate of the Irish is a superficial one. Indeed, if the implied reader is English, Edgeworth's narrator stands up for the Irish, trying to negotiate the cultural differences. However, when the implied readers are Irish, the narrative voice directed to them is an unmistakably English one, pointing out all the aspects in which the Irish fall lamentably short of the English ideal. Edgeworth is primarily the advocate of the Union between Ireland and Britain, and the narrating voice is the one of the translator, whose aim is not only to reconcile two antagonistic societies, but also in the long run to bring the stray Irish sheep into the British fold.

It should be noticed at the beginning that in Edgeworth's books for children, whenever the regional identity of her characters is mentioned, these are usually working-class children. The regional identity is then important to explain the curious accent of the characters appearing there, their quaint customs (for instance, celebrating Mayday in "Simple Susan") or jobs peculiar to a particular region. Children of the upper classes, like her most popular heroine Rosamond of "The purple jar" and other stories, seem to live in households that could be located anywhere in Britain. For this reason the choice of texts for this paper is rather limited: the texts included in this paper are "Angelina; or, L'amie inconcuse" of *The moral tales* (1801) and "The orphans" and "The white pigeon" of *The parent's assistant* (1796). I am also going to refer occasionally to "Limerick gloves" and "Rosanna", two texts from *The popular tales* (1804), which were not intended for children but for working-class "young adults" – readers placed, as Richard L. Edgeworth put it in his "Preface", "beyond circles which are sometimes exclusively considered as polite" (Edgeworth 2003c).

Ireland where Edgeworth lived and wrote was Britain's poor relative, seen by the English as downtrodden by Roman Catholicism and its priests, full of drunken and belligerent inhabitants speaking with the ludicrous accent (Lengel 2002: 44-45). Edgeworth consciously set out on a mission to correct this view, making explicit fun of it in such works as *Essay on Irish bulls* (1802) (Lengel 2002: 44-45) and counteracting the stereotype by presenting another side of Ireland. It seems that W. B. Yeats was profoundly wrong when he wrote of Edgeworth's texts that "they are Ireland talking to herself" (Canuel 2002: 124). In Edgeworth's texts Ireland is talking to the United Kingdom, where Edgeworth's hopes for the future of her country are stored and through the process of

dialogue she hopes to build a bridge across the gap of discord.

The process of Irish/English dialogue is also visible in Edgeworth's texts for children. The implied reader is apparently English, as can be seen for instance in the footnotes, explaining some characteristics of culture or language peculiar to Ireland and the Irish. However, the moral lesson about the need for industry which could eventually overcome the English prejudice, and of which examples are going to be given later in this paper, seems to be directed especially towards the Irish reader. The position of the narrator is even more complicated: it is an interpreter, explaining the cultural differences to the English reader. It is also a kind of advocate, holding up the exemplary Irish heroes and trying to abolish the prevailing stereotypes by using these figures. Finally, it is a teacher, whose moral message, as we are given to understand, should reach not only the English but also the Irish, who seem to be in sore need of the lessons on the necessity of industriousness and education.

One of the aspects of the dialogue is language, and the dialectal differences are often employed in Edgeworth's texts. Among the sources of comedy in "Angelina" are dialogues between a Welsh maid-servant and an Irish coach-driver, who seem to be hopelessly divided by the common language. In "The Limerick gloves" a lovers' tiff results from the misunderstanding over the phrase "I expect" which is used by the Irish suitor in the sense of "I hope". "But thus it is that a poor Irishman, often, for want of understanding the niceties of the English language, says the rudest when he means to say the civillest things imaginable" (Edgeworth 2003c), remarks the narrator. The linguistic differences, while adding certain spice to everyday speech, in the long run have to give in to the English of the British middle-class. The exemplary figures always speak exemplary language; indeed, the ideal farmer Gray in "Rosanna" was accused by some readers to be "superior to his condition"; the accusation which Edgeworth tries to counteract by inserting at the end of the story a supposedly authentic letter from this character, thanking for the book and filled with maxims such as "Thrice happy are they who in affluence endeavour thus to amend the morals of mankind; it's they only who enjoy true felicity" (Edgeworth 2003c). The linguistic difference is brought forward to the readers' attention just in order to be gradually erased (Corbett 2000: 44).

One issue which remains wrapped in profound silence is the question of religious divide. This is most visible in the two stories from *The popular tales* which have as their topic the troubled courtship between an Irish and an English partner, complete with the happy end. In "The Limerick gloves" Brian O'Neill, a newcomer to Hereford, is suspected of a variety of crimes, from stealing the dog of Mr Hill, his sweetheart's father, to plotting to blow up the local cathedral. Fortunately for him he is cleared of all accusations and, as Edgeworth writes allusively, "The tanner and the glover of Hereford became, from bitter

enemies, useful friends to each other; and they were convinced, by experience, that nothing could be more for their mutual advantage than to live in union". Even though the imaginary plot against the Hereford cathedral may be a distant reverberation of the Gunpowder Plot, once the suspicious-looking hole under the foundations turns out to be dug by playing children, there is no mention of any religious divide which might separate Phoebe Hill and Brian O'Neill. Similarly, in "Rosanna" Stafford, an English house-steward working in an Irish household, is warned by his mother against marrying "any Irishwoman whatsoever; who, having been bred in a mud-walled cabin, could never be expected to turn out at the long run equal to a true-born Englishwoman, bred in a slated house" (Edgeworth 2003c). Again, the prejudice turns out to be rather cultural and economic if not an architectural one. Moreover, it is soon dispelled by the meeting with her son's Irish wife, which makes Stafford's mother "soon reconciled to him and her Irish daughter-in-law, whose gentle manners and willing obedience overcame her unreasonable dislike" (Edgeworth 2003c). Once more, Edgeworth avoids mentioning religion altogether, even though the Catholic/Protestant divide was one of the constitutive differences in shaping the English identity against the Irish Catholic Other, and justifying the ruthlessness of English colonization (Tumbleton 1998: 90). (As Lord Buckingham, the ex-lord minister of Ireland observed after the uprising of 1798, "'all good Protestants' believed the extermination of the Catholics 'to be the only cure for the present and the only sure preventive for the future'" [Tumbleton 1998: 90]).

The avoidance of religious topics is obvious in all texts of Edgeworth for children, even in less controversial contexts, and it was equally obvious in Edgeworth's lifetime, when it earned her many a critical rap on the knuckles. Reviewers complained of her "systematic exclusion of all religious feeling" and "all reference to the subject of religious instruction" (Canuel 2002: 125). This lacuna can be attributed to Edgeworth's background in the philosophy of Enlightenment: as an attentive reader of Condorcet and especially Adam Smith she perceived religion as the source of trouble (Butler 2000: 164-166), and the society she lived in provided her with an ample amount of proofs for this opinion. Obviously, in texts for young readers it had its practical dimension; by shirking from the question of the characters' denomination, she avoided the awkward explanations of the Catholic/Protestant divide in Ireland which could result in a lengthy digression, straying away from the plot and unsatisfactory to either side involved in the conflict. The avoidance of religious controversy was connected also with Edgeworth's faith in the power of the free market: once the Irish learn to handle it, there will be no grounds for prejudice against them. *Homo economicus*, motivated by gain and profit, seemed for Edgeworth to be decidedly easier to negotiate with than real people with their religious partisanship.

Catherine Gallagher pointed out writing about Edgeworth's novels for adults

that one of her most oft-repeated plots is the "embourgeoisement" of the hero, when the young man of fashion learns to take care of his own financial affairs (Gallagher 1995: 258). The process, just starting at the other end of the social spectrum, takes place over and over again in her tales for children and young adults. In "The orphans" the orphaned children, living in the ruins of Rossmore Castle, manage to support themselves through plying a variety of trades, all of them described in great detail, and finally they are rewarded for their industriousness with a pot of gold – not the one hidden by leprechauns but a trove of golden coins of historic value. They hand them dutifully to the owner of the ground where the treasure was found, and after some dramatic twists involving the obligatory dishonest agent and a Jewish broker, they are appropriately rewarded with a slated house rent-free for life. This is contrasted with the figure of the beggar Goody Grope who spent her life in fruitless search of the treasure, neglecting industry in favour of luck. ("Goody is not a word used in Ireland. Collyogh is the Irish appellation of an old woman: but as Collyogh might sound strangely to English ears, we have translated it by the word Goody", as Edgeworth notices in the footnote [Edgeworth 2003a]). In "The white pigeon" the main character is a boy from an impoverished family, whose name incidentally is Brian O'Neill, just like the Irishman of "The Limerick gloves" (Edgeworth seemed to have a limited supply of "typical" Irish names). Being honest, the boy gets a white pigeon as a reward for honesty; being bent on self-education, he discovers in a book the way to train pigeons to become carrier-pigeons; being diligent, Brian manages to train the pigeon and earn money thanks to it. Finally, thanks to the pigeon he discovers a criminal plot, helps to foil it and he and his family are rewarded by the landlord with the tenancy of the local inn. In "Rosanna" the Gray family manage to rise through their diligence and wise investments from the notorious mud-walled cabin to a neat cottage, earning their money, among others, from running a tannery and a mill. Again, they have their foil in the person of the "soft Simon", "a half or a half quarter gentleman", careless and indolent though good-hearted. "Soft Simon" is an example of "content connected with indolence", while the Grays are an example of "content connected with exertion", and "examples of both may be found in abundance in Ireland" (Edgeworth 2003c).

However, these exemplary apostles of productiveness aspire as much to the comfortable material status as to Englishness, which seems to equal in Edgeworth's writings the market success. It is significant that in the colonial logic of mating it is only the English who are entitled to have prejudices against the Irish, albeit unreasonable. The Irish families embrace their English daughter or son-in-law with all their hearts and say good-naturedly "If Mr. Stafford had a prejudice against us Irish, so much the more honourable for my Rose to have conquered it" (Edgeworth 2003c). Moreover, the prejudice of the English can be dispelled if the Irish try really hard:

Stafford acted in the capacity of house-steward to the baronet; and had the management of all his master's unmanageable servants. He had brought with him, from England, ideas of order and punctuality, which were somewhat new, and extremely troublesome to the domestics at Hyacinth-hall: consequently he was much disliked by them; and not only by them but by most of the country people in the neighbourhood, who imagined he had a strong predilection in favour of every thing that was English, and an undisguised contempt for all that was Irish. They, however, perceived that this prejudice against the Irish admitted of exceptions: the family of the Grays, Stafford acknowledged, were almost as orderly, punctual, industrious, and agreeable, as if they had been born in England

(Edgeworth 2003c).

Edgeworth's mission is to accommodate the otherness of the Irish, to make them the exemplary citizens of the United Kingdom and responsible agents on the free market. Therefore, when in "The white pigeon" the local landlord tries to establish a model village, he aims towards the English model: "The little town of Somerville, in Ireland, has, within these few years, assumed the neat and cheerful appearance of an English village" (Edgeworth 2003a). Once their economic problems are resolved through the benevolent patronage of the Anglo-Irish landowners, there should be no obstacles to their integration within the United Kingdom.

The final sentence of "The Limerick gloves", prefiguring through the marital union of Phoebe Hill and Brian O'Neill the political union of Ireland and Britain, was written in November 1799, in the middle of the period between the quelling of United Irishmen rebellion in 1798 and the Act of Union in 1800. Edgeworth apparently hoped to attain through her fiction what was done on the political level through the act of the parliament. This was noticed by some of her contemporaries, notably by Walter Scott, who, though "joined some critics in commending her for making the English 'familiar with the character of their gay and kind hearted neighbours of Ireland', he also hinted that her novels paradoxically contributed to the loss of the very particularity they celebrated. Edgeworth, he claimed, had 'done more towards completing the Union [between Britain and Ireland], than perhaps all the legislative enactments by which it has been followed up'" (Canuel 2002: 125-126).

The Anglo/Irish ratio in the narrative voice of Edgeworth's texts seems to be a fluctuating value, defining itself in the opposition to the implied reader. Edgeworth is Irish when she speaks to the English, defending the Irish against their prejudices. The voice becomes English when she speaks to the Irish, preaching the gospel of diligence, order and thoroughness. Regardless of the nationality of the narrative voice, the relationship between her "little Irish boy" and her "little English boy" is clear: "to be like him and he will then love me" (Blake 1996: 69).

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