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Edgeworth, Owenson and the Masculine Border

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‘Art thou a gentleman? What is thy name? Discuss!’¹

This epigraph to Sydney Owenson’s *O’Donnel* (1814) highlights the cultural specificity of gentlemanly masculinity as the ground on which the novel will stage its critique. In this scene from *Henry V*, Pistol cannot read the signs which might mark the French soldier as a gentleman because they belong to an unfamiliar cultural context. This is the frame in which Owenson positions her Irish hero. The scene’s linguistic play with disguise and cultural misrecognition frames Roderick O’Donnel’s liminal gentlemanliness, mistaken and misrecognised throughout the novel. *Henry V* also historicises the redefining of British gentility against French culture in the context of 1789 and 1798². In *Ormond* (1817), Maria Edgeworth places another protagonist at the margins of gentlemanliness. Born from an unsanctioned marriage in barely genteel poverty, Harry Ormond is raised by an Irish peer, but not educated by him, because ‘there was no use in giving Harry Ormond the education of a gentleman, when he was not likely to have an estate.’³ Edgeworth’s novel turns on the question of where gentlemanliness originates, in land, education or innate/inherited personal qualities.

Ideas of gentility are a fluid and highly significant faultline in this period, when feudal aristocracies are giving way to bourgeois economies, and discourses of reason, sentiment, individualism and democracy are fuelling popular movements around Europe. As the new and *necessarily flexible* measure for entitlement, modern gentility is written at the border between heredity and education, reason and sensibility. Gentlemanly masculinity is also troubled by the effeminate refinements through which ideas of race, culture and civilization are shored up against peasantries at home and in the colonies. In the case of Ireland, these

questions are further complicated by the instability of a national border, then, as now, difficult to define in both the cultural imaginary and the law. As Ina Ferris puts it, the Irish national tale is a fiction of ‘migration and contact’ set in an unstable zone of cultural translation.⁴

Recent work by Nicola Lloyd, Matthew Reznicek and Nicole Reynolds has opened up a new focus on Sydney Owenson’s rich and complex uses of genre, as well as her relation to empire and to European cosmopolitanism.⁵ Nevertheless, Edgeworth’s less problematically realist, more ideologically unified novels remain more visible in the canon than Owenson’s generically adventurous productions, most of which remain out of print in scholarly editions. From Eagleton and Trumpener’s discussions of the Irish novel to this more recent work, Owenson’s *O’Donnel* is treated only briefly if at all. Its formal and generic promiscuity and many-layered ironies continue to resist critical containment. This essay sets *O’Donnel*’s complex and radical uses of form against Edgeworth’s studied use of the *bildungsroman* in *Ormond*. It will focus specifically on the underexamined manner in which these Irish women novelists reposition the heterosexual plot to focus contested economies and their ideological residue through new and unstable masculinities in the decades after the Act of Union.⁶ Central masculine characters and the plots in which their identities are constructed can inform the manner in which we view these fictional genres, the political and social work that they do, and the way in which gender operates at material, fictional and canonical levels.

Very early on in the history of the English novel, troublesome Irish gentlemen appear at its margins. In the decades prior to *O’Donnel* and *Ormond*, the overt and unbounded masculine sexuality of such characters drives plots and defines English masculinity by contrast. Where aristocratic French gentleman haunt the effeminate border of English masculinity, Irish men mark its limit through excess of masculine sexuality and of sentiment. The Irish fortune

hunter in the heterosexual plot is the location of contested national economies, conflating active sexual threat with national threat.

Mr Macdersey in Frances Burney's *Camilla* (1796) and Sir Patrick O'Carrol in Amelia Opie's *Adeline Mowbray* (1805) are two examples of such sexually aggressive Irish gentleman who drive or threaten to destabilise plots. Burney's benevolent Lord O'Lerney expresses the reverse discourse here. The fact that his cousin,

has his share of the wildness, the blunders, the eccentricities, and the rhodomontade, which form with you English, our stationary national character, must not be denied; but he has also, what may equally, I hope, be given to us in the lump, generosity, spirit and good intentions.⁷

In both its positive and its negative characteristics, this persistent stereotype of the Irishman speaks of an excess of personal force and unbridled sentiment which works as a defining opposition for the developing notion of English gentlemanliness as self-restraint. It also easily allies with romanticist ideas of sentiment and expansive feeling which are politically charged in the period. This characterisation develops through the century and into characters such as Trollope's Phineas Finn (1860s), an Irish *ingénu* who, unconscious of his own pronounced sexual magnetism, conquers London politics via its society women. Finn's excesses of chivalric sentiment land him in various scrapes throughout *Phineas Finn* and *Phineas Redux*.

Long before Trollope, both Edgeworth and Owenson place such Irish gentlemen at the centre rather than the margins of their plots, and their plots on the border between Englishness and Irishness. With differing political and generic investments, each seeks to school her audience's response to the newly configured nation by repositioning Irish masculinity, and orchestrating direct reader identification with the previously marginal Irishman in plots which draw him to the centre of the national stage. In the context of the

national tale, both authors redeploy established subgenres of the novel in complex and interlocking ways. Both explore the question of masculine identity by repositioning their heroes through a knowing use of contemporary discourses of reason, sentiment and character. Both allow space for the working poor of Ireland to speak of Britain's worst abuses, closing their plots of with economic and social reconciliation and pleas for inclusion. Both transfer Irish lands to male heroes through female heiresses, and speak back to the national tale's mapping of Irish history onto the contemporary landscape. Finally, forming their central characters on the borders between hereditary and social identity, reason and sentiment, interior and exterior models of the masculine individual, these authors make significantly different decisions regarding the use of subjective narration and genre.

Katie Trumpener argues for a sense of shared culture and identity developed among the Celtic countries in this period. 'London,' she writes, 'is no longer the centre of novelistic consciousness.'⁸ It is worth noting here, however, that these novels were commissioned and printed in London, where they were also widely reviewed. Clare Connolly details the dependence of the Irish novel on London printers and London markets in this period.⁹ Ina Ferris locates Edgeworth's and Owenson's novels as performances within a shifting sphere of British public discourse¹⁰. The implied audience for these particular novels is quite clearly a British public formed of Irish ascendancy landlords and general English readers. Connolly's material history of the Irish novel in this period locates it in terms of an increasingly cross-national publishing industry, London-based distribution and growing English-language readerships on both sides of the sea in the wake of the Act of Union. The Irish novel, as both material object and imaginative representation, 'is located at the intersection of these dynamics of proximity and distance.'¹¹

The 'crisis' or shift in masculine identity and sociability which took place in the later half of the eighteenth century has been much discussed. Conflations of foreignness,

effeminacy and political threat in male figures are common in the period. In “‘Manners’ Make the Man: Politeness, Chivalry, and the Construction of Masculinity, 1750 to 1830’, Michèle Cohen examines the construction of a historicised masculinity in the later eighteenth century. Cohen argues that during this period ideals of sociable politeness were countered by a flexible idea of chivalric masculinity related to the Saxon past, which ‘provided a vocabulary for refashioning the gentleman as masculine, [and] integrating national identity with Enlightenment notions of progress and civilization’.¹² With regard to Owenson and Edgeworth, it is significant that this new anxiety about polite and sociable masculinity is often figured through attempts to come to terms with the British and Irish relationship to the *ancien régime*, in the wake of the French revolution and the Irish uprising of 1798. Matthew Reznicek argues that the relationship to France in *Ormond* and in Owenson’s *The Novice of St Dominick* (1806) and *The O’Brien’s and the O’Flaherty’s* (1827) is a central focus that complicates accepted categories of the national and the historical tale.¹³ Pre-Revolution France plays a small but significant part in *O’Donnel* as well, with Roderick O’Donnel’s intimate memories of the dead Dauphiness assuring readers of his commitment to aristocratic claims. It remains significant here that France functions as an ‘other’ place, displacing embedded experiences of historical upheaval, economic failure and economic danger.

These authors’ very different attempts to construct an individual national identity for their heroes involve complex play with temporality, incorporating variously chivalric constructions of national myth, more recent historical context, the expanded psychological time frame of sensibility, and the realist temporality of the contemporary everyday that would come to define the historical novel after Scott. The construction of identity in these novels involves characteristic instabilities that place it on the borders between being and perception, nature and the social, and between England and Ireland. All of these borders are written across each other and none can be quite fixed or rendered impermeable.

Likewise, the borders of genre. As Katie Trumpener notes, Irish novels authored by women in the 1810s trouble the canonical separation of domestic and national genres which has been enacted chiefly through the distorted position of Austen and Scott as the gendered poles of domestic and national authorship in the period.¹⁴ Claire Connolly argues that the designation ‘national tale’ cannot quite encompass the set of related works published in the period.¹⁵ Certainly, *Ormond* is consciously placed outside it, though it shares many of the chief intentions and effects of the national tale. Following Ferris, we might add that the designations domestic and national confine readings of novels to the realm of the representational, ignoring the social, material and political agency involved in their publication and distribution.

Connolly discusses the manner in which critical narratives around the Irish novel have for centuries imprisoned them in a structure of representation. From contemporary reviews forward, critics persistently focus on whether and how novels can representationally contain an already existing place called Ireland.¹⁶ Indeed the term ‘Irish novel’, when used by early nineteenth-century critics, refers to subject, rather than author or location of production. Raymond Williams points out that the idea of cultural mediation, contrived to supersede flawed positivist ideas of realist or naturalist reflections of ‘real life’, ultimately partakes of the same problematic structure.¹⁷ Both ideas separate cultural products from their world in artificial ways. Critical traditions, feminist and otherwise, often gender this imagined separation when viewing novels of the romantic period, reading novels as active (national) and passive/covert (domestic) in ways that may not align with these terms in the period. It is internally clear in *Ormond* and *O’Donnel* that Edgeworth and Owenson saw the writing and publishing of novels as social and political action, and texts themselves as embedded in the worlds they describe. The focus on education and reading, the progress of heroes across

national maps and through a variety of contrasted cultural contexts, and a marked awareness of interaction with readers, all evidence this understanding.

In explicit response to Rousseau and Enlightenment thinking more broadly, central characters in these novels are continuous with a general rethinking of the individual, always in the first instance masculine, through ideas of the natural, education, sociability, reason and sentiment. Reznicek reads them, via Lukács and Moretti, in relation to Goethe's *bildungsromane*.¹⁸ The cultural life of the European novel is inseparable from the growing need for such acts of individual development. At the same time both Edgeworth and Owenson, with openly didactic purposes derived from the sentimental novel, articulate emerging notions of gentlemanliness as aligned or contrasted with stereotypes of Irish and English character and with particular political sensibilities. Questions of land ownership and cosmopolitan mobility speak to the masculine hero as the obvious narrative vehicle, though Owenson will work her way around that in some subsequent novels.

While both novels are received by critics as Irish tales, *O'Donnel* advertises itself with the subtitle 'A National Tale' while *Ormond* calls itself simply 'A Tale'¹⁹. This distancing from the category of the national by which Edgeworth was nevertheless defined, was a conscious rejection of a genre that makes claims which the novel rejects. This rejection is signalled in stylistics as well subtitle. *Ormond* has a generically unified and uninterruptedly realist narrative structure, by no means a dominant mode in the period. Owenson is generically promiscuous and makes explicit calls to sentiment. In a study of antiquarian orientalism in *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806), Heather Braun argues that Owenson's generic layerings and instabilities produce 'a strikingly ahistorical, even timeless version of Irish national history'.²⁰ In fact, the neglected *O'Donnel* is richer in this regard, viewing many of the antiquarian strategies in which the earlier *Wild Irish Girl* partakes with clear cynicism. Genre

works for both women at a linguistic level, as a system of meaning which can be deployed for a knowing audience. Its constituent parts and recognisable structural relations, like language itself, form a recognisable set of signs through which authors can communicate with readers. Various genre effects can be layered and juxtaposed, repositioned ironically, and thus didactically. In *Ormond*, Edgeworth takes up the novel of education on multiple levels.

Though the idea of gentlemanliness depends on natural predisposition, it is ultimately, for Edgeworth, the product of correct education. Its lack in Harry Ormond signals at the outset Edgeworth's address to genre, which she marks by using *Tom Jones* as an intertext on two ironic levels. Harry Ormond the character reads Fielding's novel and is led temporarily astray into sexual promiscuity, while *Ormond* the novel is structured like *Tom Jones*, beginning with Ormond's protection by the rustic yet gentlemanly Cornelius O'Shane, the Squire Allworthy of the piece, and then detailing in picaresque fashion Ormond's travels, education and eventual desire for the perfectly genteel feminine object. Edgeworth rewrites each of these characteristics in a plot of development which traces her hero's journey from Irish provincialism to English cosmopolitanism on the international stage and back to happily enlightened stewardship on Irish lands. His transformation is framed in a national landscape which specifically writes it as a civilising process.

Both Edgeworth and Owenson use, sometimes ironically, ideas and language derived from a colonial discourse of savagery and civilisation. *Ormond* uses these associations in a comic scene which conflates historical time periods and a variety of colonial subjects in describing a dialogic 'battle' between the ascendancy landowner Sir Ulick O'Shane and his cousin Cornelius O'Shane. Cornelius wields a verbal 'tomahawk' and Sir Ulick a 'sword of Damascus'. Cornelius wins and Sir Ulick calls him a savage.²¹ In different modes, each writer repositions the notion of the marginal Irish as savages, and turns English discourses of honour, chivalry and character back on themselves. They pose a noble, sympathetic but

unrefined (sometimes passionate, warlike) masculinity against an educated, sociable, modern gentlemanliness, with very different aims. Frequent slippages and shifting sympathies highlight the liminal status of such gentleman by raising questions of heredity, inheritance and acquired character.

Set opposite the corrupt politician Sir Ulick O'Shane, who raises Ormond, Sir Ulick's cousin, Cornelius ('King Corny') the antique Irish gentleman, is Ormond's second masculine role model. With comic pretensions to nobility, he enjoys a benevolent but haphazard reign over his 'subjects' in the Black Islands. These islands are separated by a lake from the mainland, which King Corny refers to as 'the continent' and there he keeps himself isolated, refusing to participate in the new national life. The romanticised idea of 'the west' which shapes earlier Irish national novels and travel narratives is comically critiqued here, while at the same time we are invited to view King Corny's qualities, particularly his refusal to engage in neglectful or corrupt practices with regard to land and government, with respect and affection. As Ormond reflects for us:

Despite all the folly of his kingship . . . Cornelius O'Shane was not a person to be despised. He was, indeed, a man of great natural powers, both of body and mind; of inventive genius, energy, perseverance, which might have attained the greatest objects; though from insufficient knowledge, and self-sufficient perversity, they had wasted themselves on absurd or trivial purposes.²²

This eulogy distinguishes natural from learned characteristics as it poses the regional stage against the national and argues for the duty of gentleman to take the latter, as the proper sphere of masculine action.

Significantly, the critique of King Corny here regards his stubborn insistence on making things himself. Through Harry Ormond's focalised perspective we are invited to 'doubt whether it were worthy of a king, or a gentleman, to be his own shoemaker, hatter and

tailor; whether it were not better managed in society where these things are performed by different tradesman.’²³ Gentleman ought not to be self-sufficient. They should be embedded in the complexities of national/colonial economy, as, by clear implication, should Ireland. Gentlemanliness arises from informational social context, a reasoned acceptance of the economic social order and, of course, absorption within it above the level of physical labour.²⁴

While King Corny presents the man of great ‘natural powers’ without social education, Sir Ulick O’Shane provides the contrast of the entirely social animal with little innate decency or self-restraint. Practiced novel readers will now see that Harry Ormond must achieve the balance between these states, and so, during this episode we are also introduced to Harry Ormond’s natural powers. Chief among these is innate gentlemanly self-restraint, articulated in a novel which continually warns us of the excesses of sentiment.

The heterosexual plot, with its facility for harnessing identification, producing alterity as aesthetic relation, for reconciling personal desires, reading pleasure and national and social economies, is the accepted vehicle here. Alongside a succession of masculine role models, Ormond is presented with a parade of feminine objects. He is fooled, schooled and finally master of his own carefully restrained and well-reasoned desire.

One erotic episode occurs at Castle Hermitage with the sentimental Lady Millicent. Here, the narrative perspective takes its furthest distance from Harry and provides a didactic critique which equates negative capability with femininity and positivism with patriarchy. Lady Millicent refers everything to feeling and believes there can be no virtue without enthusiasm. She deplores utility, hates definitions and loves descriptions. ‘Her ideas of virtue were carried to such extremes, that they touched the opposite vices . . . for the line between right and wrong, that line which should be strongly marked, was effaced, so delicately had sentiment shaded off its boundaries.’ The narrator then interrupts the historical suspension of

the narrative to comment that ‘These female metaphysics, this character of exalted sentiment and sensitive softness, was not quite so cheap and common some years ago as it has lately become.’²⁵ Femininity is here equated with an emerging popular sphere, and both with moral danger. We might read an implicit critique of Owenson and other novelists here.

Such calls to self-restraint are posed against both these sexual threats to Ormond and threats of rebellion which lurk at the novel’s margins. In two episodes, at his native Castle Hermitage and on the lands of his future wife, the suggestion of peasant unrest lurks in the countryside around the house. On the estate of the Annalys this threat is entirely diffused by enlightened and benevolent management of the land and those who work it. Against ubiquitous descriptions of Irish men in the English novel as bold, effusive, sexually excessive and quick to anger in defence of honour, Ormond’s schooled self-restraint conflates his journey towards gentlemanliness with his eventual identification as an Englishman, against the Irish peasantry.

Having spent time in the Black Islands reading improving literature and engaging in various erotic episodes, Ormond embarks on journeys through both Ireland and pre-revolutionary France, encountering an array of masculine characters along the way. The French episodes are framed through the pervasive romantic-era structure of feeling around surface and depth, which appears here as a critique of French sociability together with a celebration of the most reasoned and cerebral of its pre-revolution philosophical productions. Edgeworth’s critique of the French rests chiefly on this excessive sociability, conflated in the novel with both profligate gambling and sexual licentiousness.

In the course of his stay in Paris, Ormond is known as both *le bel Irlandois* and *le bel Anglois*. On a trip to view a portrait of the Dauphiness, Miss O’Faley complains of Ormond’s restraint and asks where is his *sensibilité*? He replies that he hopes it is safe, ‘at the bottom of my heart’. She returns that if he fails to display sentiment in public, he ‘will seem but an

Englishman.’ He replies, ‘I can only be content to be and to seem what I am.’²⁶ Returning to Ireland, having thwarted threats to his own fortune and to Moriarty Carrol, his single dependent peasant, he returns as an avowed Englishman. Restrained English masculinity is the end of his journey, and the ultimate object of his desire is an enlightened and benevolent ascendancy heiress. The marriage here enacts the standard Edgeworth containment in the diffusion of rebellious threat through good feudal management.

In their various uses and pointed refusals of genre structures, both Edgeworth and Owenson demonstrate a conscious understanding of the novel as an instrument. Uses, refusals and juxtapositions of genre effects allow a conversation on at least two levels, the level of character, plot and action and the level of the deployment of these with or against generic expectations. In *Ormond*, Edgeworth repeatedly refuses and destabilises the use of genre effects.

Early on, Ormond’s journey is inaugurated with the assurance that we will see all of his faults along the way, because ‘. . . his biographer, in writing the life of Ormond, deems it a point of honor and conscience to extenuate nothing’.²⁷ This will not be a sentimental novel. Ormond will be characterised according to the realist type of a hopeful young provincial, in need of travel, good reading and reasoned reflection. The novel does not contain footnotes, refer to historical or antiquarian texts, or position any of its major episodes through letters, diaries or found documents. Its style is a uniform and linear realism which, though set forty years in the past, evokes more of the temporal dailiness of contemporary realism than Owenson’s contemporaneous history. Its focalised narration contains very little suggestion of subjective interiority, but employs a masterfully fluid and consistent free-indirect style.

Throughout *Ormond*, the only breaks in the narrative’s linear temporality are these moments of direct address which inform the reader, often sarcastically, that here the novel

will depart from popular genre conventions. In the throes of an infatuation, ‘Our young hero, hero-like, [takes] a solitary walk to indulge his feelings’.²⁸ This interruption abjects popular genre as it mimics it, and at the same time uses sarcasm to forestall any suspension in those very feelings which might call forth sentiment in the reader. On the way to denouement, the narrator stops to distance the novel from travel narrative as well.²⁹ The close of the novel underlines its didactic purpose stylistically, by delivering its conclusions through a rhetorically structured series of paragraphs which refuse a succession of popular genres as they wrap up its various subplots. ‘Those who wish to hear something of estates, as well as of weddings, should be told . . .’.³⁰ ‘To those who think the mind is a kingdom of yet more consequence than even that of the Black Islands, it may be agreeable to hear. . .’³¹ These refusals ironically highlight Edgeworth’s awareness of the uses to which readers, especially feminine readers, put novels.

What he [Ormond] said or what Florence answered, we do not know; but we are perfectly sure that if we did, the repetition of it would tire the reader. . . . It is humbly requested that every young lady of delicacy and feeling will put herself in the place of Florence Annaly³²

This meta-fictional gesture is common also to Jane Austen, who likewise deploys the realist novel against various popular genres and against affective reader responses as excesses of sentiment. These gestures work to abject the popular reader. The popular reader defines Edgeworth’s use of genre even as Edgeworth distances her. The novel defines itself by escaping from sentiment into ironic distance, thus producing Englishness.

Katie Trumpener opens *Bardic Nationalism* with the observation that the canonical English literature of the romantic period embodies a narrowing affective and generic scope, while

Over the same period, however, a formally experimental, and now less studied parallel literature—a new travel literature, a nationally inflected picaresque, a new antiquarian literature, a new Gothic and historical fiction, a new novel of foreign and domestic manners—begins to explore a much larger repertoire of experiences and places. . .³³

This essay would like to suggest that Edgeworth's very 'English' aims, her focus on masculine restraint at the level of character, genre and national life, might go a long way to explain her greater visibility in the canon of the English novel, relative to Owenson, who sits in the second of Trumpener's categories. Both authors were notably popular in their own lifetimes. Their novels sold well and were widely reviewed.³⁴

Edgeworth pointedly rejects virtually every genre in Trumpener's list above. In its three volumes, *O'Donnel* partakes of them all, often using them against themselves or their readers in ironic double positionings, and juxtaposing them against each other, creating a series of desired effects in *bricoleur* fashion. A central narrative thread takes Roderick O'Donnel on a journey away from and back to his home in the landscape of Donegal, but the novel has little concern with temporal linearity, singularity or unity of form, and little with other forms of restraint in its representations and effects. Whilst it provides a determined closure, this cannot be said to be the endpoint of any kind of *telos*. Once accounted for, *O'Donnel* complicates canonical narratives of the development of genre in the period – from Romanticism to Realism – which *The Wild Irish Girl* misleadingly underpins.

O'Donnel opens in epistolary form, with its first chapter a series of letters introducing a group of English characters on a tour of the northern Irish coast. In the succeeding chapters these characters present an array of types exemplifying a variety of social, political and moral positions. The various faults on display are sharply gendered—officious women, gluttonous men, dull girls and young men 'without distinction'. Their tour then takes the reader into a more realist travel narrative. As the characters consume the Irish landscape we are able to

judge them by their affective responses to various sublime views and picturesque prospects and people. Detailed descriptions and informative footnotes mimic ‘non-fictional’ travel narratives of the period. Occasionally, Owenson’s notes interrupt her narrator to explain to readers where her fictional Antrim coast diverges from the actual landscape.

Sublime affect and picturesque surprise are engineered to raise our sympathies, while character responses at one remove reveal our investments and redirect our identifications. Our first glimpse of Roderick O’Donnell occurs against the backdrop of Sliabh Barragh, described in extravagant detail. The characters discern a solitary figure perched perilously on the rocks, and conjecture about its identity. The person then ‘sprung from his giddy station, and to all appearance sunk into the waves. The ladies screamed.’³⁵ The image of Thomas Gray’s (1757) Welsh bard is impossible to miss³⁶. Following some hysterics, the exemplary rational gentleman Mr. Glentworth descends to the beach to investigate, and reports that, ‘all is right. We could not see, at this distance, that the man jumped into a boat, anchored under the shadow of the rock on which he stood’.³⁷ We are invited to laugh at the English tourists’ romantic misperceptions of the Irish landscape and its inhabitants in terms which specifically distance the novel from the tradition of antiquarian and bardic nationalism. Throughout, the novel critiques the English popular culture fetish for an Ireland viewed only through a romanticised version of its past. At the same time, this emotionally invested past is used to cement our sympathies to Roderick O’Donnell. Trumpener’s very brief reading is confined to this early section of travel narrative³⁸. Owenson, however, does not end her forceful manipulations of genre here.

Roderick O’Donnell’s faithful retainer and childhood friend McRory later emerges in comically similar fashion out of the darkened landscape of a stormy night ‘springing from a rock at a fearful height, and coming down on his feet, with a weight sufficient to have dislocated every joint in a less powerful frame: a quantity of loose earth and rocks came

down with him'³⁹ These two instances create a seamless identification between masculine characters and the landscape from which they emerge, while the devices of the travel narrative equate landscape and national map. O'Donnel is thus rendered metonymically continuous with Ireland itself as the narrative eventually focuses on him and moves forward.

Encountered later that day and identified by the fine family heirloom which his dog Bran wears as a collar, O'Donnel explains some of his position and family history to the sympathetic Mr Glentworth, while the ersatz English gentleman Mr Dexter listens close by. The O'Donnel titles have been first transferred and then forfeited with Catholic dispossession. But, says O'Donnel:

“*titles* in Ireland are uncertain tenures; happily, however, high descent and antiquity of blood are beyond the reach of forfeiture; as independence of mind and integrity of principle are beyond the reach of high sounding names to confer, or of power to take away or to bestow.”

“All very true,” returned Mr. Glentworth, while Mr. Dexter whispered in Miss Singleton’s ear, that that was a passage from “*Elegant Extracts*.”⁴⁰

O'Donnel’s essential genteel masculinity, marked by the emblematic collar, is posed against a tawdry and superficial social gentlemanliness in a manner common to the period. This juxtaposition of sympathetic didacticism and noble sentiment against social irony characterises much of the novel. Here it marks the bridge from the travel narrative to a Gothic section which positions its relation to history.

Emerging as a figure indistinguishable from the sublime landscape, O'Donnel is referred to as ‘the stranger’ well into the second volume of the novel, and long after we know his name and his family history. The description of his isolated lodge encompasses both standard gothic devices and the paraphernalia of the modern gentleman. As the travellers view it:

. . .the shelves were laden with books in almost every language. The larger table was covered with the results of scientific research, mingled with papers, manuscripts, and some mathematical instruments. A large book lay open on a reading-desk; the character was beautiful, and the vellum pages illuminated. An antique sword, of most curious workmanship, was suspended over the chimney-piece; and the pedigree of the *O'Donnel* family beginning with *Niall*, of the nine hostages, hung beneath it. But the object which most attracted, and longest fixed their attention, was the picture of a man in a religious habit. Between this picture and the stranger, they observed a striking resemblance.⁴¹

A moment later, the laconic Miss O'Halloran observes that this picture is moving. It is a secret door, from which O'Donnel emerges out of the painting of his relative.

The scene establishes O'Donnel's education, his inherited gentility and the intersection of historical time with the contemporary narrative. Its Gothic effects position O'Donnel through disguise and displacement, emerging mysteriously out of historical time into modernity. Where Edgeworth positions Harry Ormond's gentility as aspirational, a thing to be acquired through self-restraint and proscription, Roderick O'Donnel's status as a gentleman is presented to us as unambiguously inherited and timeless, part of national myth. He is the product of generations, his gentility pre-existing in the narrative. Ormond moves through historical time, while O'Donnel is the rock upon which history breaks. He is framed through epic temporality, the static timeframe of national myth.⁴² Yet this Gothic strategy is again ironically destabilised even as it is deployed.

The thirty-page historical inset narrative which opens volume II is framed through a comic dialogue between the officious Lady Singleton and the retainer McRory in which each mistakes the other's historical frame of reference. She affects terror at the sword hanging above the mantel, asks whom it belongs to and is told, "To the great O'Donnel, my lady,

who beat the English troops fairly out of the province.” “Lately?” asked Lady Singleton eagerly. “Oh yes, Madam, that’s when the master’s people were kings of the county round.” She asks whether this happened in the late ““tumults which we have heard so much of in England”” and McRory, still mistaking her, says that it did. She then asks whether the White Boys or the Oak Boys (agrarian reformists of the late eighteenth century) cause much trouble in the area. No, says McRory, ““we have no call to the likes of them at all, at all.””⁴³ McRory’s immersion in historical time is total. He makes no distinction between ‘lately’ and the sixteenth century. Lady Singleton’s apprehensions are driven by a colonial culture of fear and latent terror which views all Ireland and Irishmen as potentially violent.

McRory then pulls down a volume which contains the preserved narrative of O’Donnel the Red, ‘reproduced’ in the novel as a set of textual fragments. This family history establishes the dispossession of the O’Donnells, as it elevates O’Donnel’s romantic status. Working inside the frame of O’Donnel’s study and his diffident but gracious reception of guests, this episode blends chivalric masculinity with modern gentlemanliness as antiquarian study and educated sociability, then critiques that blend.

Antiquarian narrative intersects other uses of genre in complex ways throughout *O’Donnel*. It forms romanticist slippages into the Gothic and early modern past, ironically unmasking English objectifications of modern Irish people and in footnotes works against the conciliation called for in the body of the narrative. While O’Donnel gracefully relinquishes any claim to his ancestral lands, footnoted *précis* of antiquarian and primary historical texts reveal the English as ruthless and duplicitous usurpers of land and titles. Given the patronage under which the novel was written, we might relate this writing of footnotes against the grain to the episodes in which the Duchess, formerly Miss O’Halloran, schools O’Donnel in the art of Irish performance for English patrons. The novel performs as she does.

Karen Steele, in a rich discussion of travel, mobility and the colonial contact zone in *Ormond* and *O'Donnel*, reads a determined multilingual cosmopolitanism in both authors' construction of Irish characters. As they flexibly inhabit a variety of social, cultural and linguistic spaces, readers are 'invited to consider the complicated perceptions, performances, sights and sounds of expected and unexpected contact zones—and to acknowledge the provisional, constructed, and composite nature of all national identities.'⁴⁴ Owenson writes this at the level of textual and generic mechanics as well as character, dialogue and scene.

The remainder of the novel concerns O'Donnel's further impoverishment and dispossession, and the vicissitudes of an extended sojourn in England which finally becomes a heterosexual plot involving Miss O'Halloran. By the middle of Volume II, a point-of-view strongly focalised through O'Donnel identifies our desires with his. This suspension in masculine psychology is perhaps another reason why readings of female agency in Owenson's novels, such as Ina Ferris', treat *O'Donnel* only briefly.

O'Donnel is eventually invited to a house party by the Welsh aristocrat Lady Llanberis, and the episodes set on her estate were widely received on publication as a *roman a clef*, detailing Owenson's own experiences as a temporary fascination for the Whig aristocracy following the publication of *The Wild Irish Girl*.⁴⁵ Roderick appears publicly as Colonel O'Donnel, having earned that rank in foreign service. Yet his character as a circulating social commodity is presented through the need for Irish people to perform Irishness for English society gatherings. Miss O'Halloran, now the widowed Duchess of Belmont, is at first unrecognisable. She is invited everywhere as the latest picturesque figure and manipulates Lady Llanberis and her guests through a studied and perfectly pitched performance of Irish oddity. Even McRory is induced to sing and discourse in his charming brogue for the house party guests. When O'Donnel begins to take offence at this, the duchess

quietly stops him, telling him that if he reacts he will be 'lost'. He must laugh it off and trust to her more practised negotiation of the English and their cultural fetishes.

O'Donnel encounters further historical mispositionings here. He has been invited so that he may play Orosmane in a domestic production of Voltaire's *Zaire*. Throughout his stay at the house he is repeatedly conflated with the exotic and sympathetic prince of the play. He is also referred to as O'Donnel the Red by characters who have heard his family story from Lady Singleton and once again confused historical Ireland with its present. This turns out to be the reason for Lady Llanberis' invitation. 'I assure you I consider you as a *genuine Irish chief*; and what Lady Singleton told me about your being *kidnapped* in your youth, and confined in the Castle of Dublin, rendered you most amazingly interesting.'⁴⁶

In this context, O'Donnel finally responds to the continued insults of one Lord Savill and a challenge is made. At first Lord Savill refuses it, because he does not believe O'Donnel to be a gentleman. Another misdirected letter, containing Savill's vicious assessment of his character, falls into O'Donnel's hands. As for your "'copper Colonel",' Chevalier, Comte, or *mi Lord*, O'Donnel; for all these he *has* been in his day, I dare say, and more.'⁴⁷ Lord Savill positions him as the masquerading gentleman threatening the boundaries of the English romance, who will 'throw his handkerchief' either at Lady Llanberis or the '*Pamela* Duchess of Belmont.' Lady Llanberis should let O'Donnel down softly, for she can be sure 'he will present himself in town as *fresh from Longlands*, with the sanction of your ladyship's notice, and the certificate of his *gentillesse* obtained from your favour'.⁴⁸ Like Opie and Burney, Lord Savill frames Irish gentlemanliness through masquerade, imposition and speculative social and financial capital.

The duel is fought and General Savill, who has acted as Lord Savill's second, attests to O'Donnel's display of all the qualities of genuine gentlemanly masculinity. 'He refused all proofs, all testimony of being by birth, what, in my opinion he evidently is by education, by

conduct, and manners— *a gentleman*.⁴⁹ Significantly, proofs of gentlemanliness include not only the fact that he has displayed ‘firmer nerves in such a situation’ than the General has ever seen, but also his total loss of composure after having shot his opponent. ‘He flew in great agitation to his assistance—he supported him in his arms.’⁵⁰ These excesses of sympathy are explicitly excluded from Edgeworth’s masculine model.

O’Donnel does also eventually provide actual paper documentation of family history and rank. Here society is schooled by the hero, where *Ormond* enacts the reverse. Edgeworth and Owenson both construct gentlemanliness on the border between education, sociability and hereditary, between social circulation and innate qualities, and between reason and sentiment. They differ in the requisite degree of sensibility and sentiment. This divergence occurs at the level of both character and narrative effect. Edgeworth’s narrative deflections and her discourses on the moral dangers of excessive sentiment are rejections of qualities which value subjective experience above social restraint, and so easily lend themselves to Gothic affective excesses and Jacobin sensibilities. Her narrative remains largely on the surface of its characters. Owenson, on the other hand deliberately orchestrates characterisations and narrative effects which produce heightened, even excessive sentiment.

Eventually, after an episode in which O’Donnel’s depression is described in startlingly naturalist detail, these psychological effects are channelled through the desiring alterity of erotic relation. A closely focalised passage presents the disorder of O’Donnel’s thoughts. She ‘had taken possession of his mind, his senses: and how little government he now held over either, he had recently but too well ascertained’.⁵¹ The word ‘government’ echoes an earlier playful exchange in which O’Donnel and the Duchess inhabit the language of sovereignty and subjection. Remember, O’Donnel says ‘that to command obedience is to imply protection; and that in our’s [sic], as in all bonds of allegiance, the sovereign and the subject stand respectively committed.’⁵² This frames the eventual marriage through which

O'Donnel regains his ancestral lands in the language of the Irish relationship with England, resituating the standard political and generic allegory. Here, lands are restored via feminine *couverture* and transfer of wealth. The formerly Irish Miss O'Halloran is now repeatedly referred to as the English peeress, having inherited the lands on the death of her husband the Duke of Belmont. O'Donnel's marriage will restore them to him, but not at the price of gentlemanly restraint.

First the figure of the sexually predatory Irish fortune hunter returns to haunt them. Safely displacing their own situation, the Duchess suggests that O'Donnel try for Lady Llanberis. He replies: "though I am poor and an Irishman, still I am not a fortune hunter." She responds in terms which align O'Donnel's excess of sensibility with both manliness and Irishness.

"That you are an Irishman, *genuine* and thorough bred, there can be no doubt; with your porcupine spirit, rising before it is assailed, and throwing its quill before it receives a wound: with you one never knows whether one is on the point of touching the life-pulse of pride, or the tremulous nerve of *honor*"⁵³

As O'Donnel struggles to master his desire in the face of the social circulation of his character as an Irishman, the battle between desire and restraint is rendered as cultural difference.

In order to win the Duchess, he must lose himself completely in an outpouring of sentiment. Finally conquered by desire, he breaks the rules of gentlemanly conduct by writing the Duchess a love letter, though he is poor and she is a wealthy English peeress. Once O'Donnel has committed this breach, he finds the Duchess waiting in his lodge, having secretly orchestrated his loss of control and his avowal, together with a well-meaning neighbour. Waiving his letter, the Duchess declares, 'But for this, the prejudices of honor, of

pride and decorum, would have carried the victory, and happiness would have been sacrificed on their altar.’⁵⁴

Their eventual union exercises the figure of the Irish fortune hunter from the margins of Britain and its novel by establishing his claims as legitimate, allowing him to reasonably forfeit them by consigning them to history and then bringing him back to the centre of the plot and the unified nation. The novel ends with McRory’s recitation of O’Donnel’s many gentlemanly qualities and his assertion that ‘there is no *rayson* in life why he shouldn’t be a great parliament man.’⁵⁵ Having repeatedly tied affective excess to Irishness, this resolution solidifies the national economy of the Union, via the Duchess’ agency, through sentimental freedom of expression, rather than restraint.

Both Edgeworth and Owenson manipulate and ironically repudiate various genre positionings, seeking to escape the effects of the sentimental novel and/or antiquarian national tale with pointed use of irony. Their studied uses, redeployments and refusals of genre underline their understanding of the novel as socially instrumental. Their invitations and refusals render the reader visible, and thus also reveal the novel as object, commodity and contested cultural product intended for public use.

Its consumers are already widely conceived as feminine. A contemporary review (1816) of Charlotte Nooth’s *Eglantine* demonstrates a growing understanding of the novel in these terms, of the dangers of its public use and its calls to sentiment.

Thousands there are of young females among the lower classes of society, who devote to these works every hour they can snatch from their necessary employments; who receive whatever is presented, without distinction and without preference, and who derive as much pleasure from any of the nameless, numberless novels which form the ordinary stock of the lending library, as from the valuable productions of Miss

Edgeworth and Miss Burney. The circulation of a novel is not proportional to its merit or demerit . . .⁵⁶

The image of the physically avid and intellectually passive mass of feminine consumers of popular culture is already well established by 1816. The expression of moral and aesthetic panic assumes that novels have moral and social effects, and that these effects are most dangerous as they act upon working-class women. While Edgeworth's stylistic restraint and cultural cleanliness earn her a place with the worthy here, Owenson disappears into the 'nameless' and the 'numberless'.

Ina Ferris notes, via Frank Donoghue, that writers of this period 'were engaged in a struggle over the power of literary legitimation and definition, impelled in large part by concern with the "phantom of the English reading public"'.⁵⁷ As the canon is formed around particular stylistic unities, these are understood as expressions of national character posed expressly against social threat. *Ormond* and *O'Donnel* show us that this struggle is written across the Irish border in terms of opposed masculinities and a received politics of style. As Edgeworth, Austen and Scott are canonised, romanticist masculinity is abjected, together with its textual effects, into the realm of the popular, the sentimental and the sensational where it remains throughout the nineteenth century. Its rejection is written as English national character as a particular mode of masculinity and as unified fictional realism. Toward the end of the century, this refusal of popular audience and genre effects will coalesce in the idea of the apolitical literary. In the comparison between *Ormond* and *O'Donnel*, we can clearly see its political roots.

¹ William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, 4.4.5-7, quoted in Owenson, *O'Donnel*.

² For two more detailed, and very different, examinations of the construction and uses of French episodes in Edgeworth and Owenson see Matthew Reznicek, *The European Metropolis: Paris and Nineteenth-century Irish Women Novelists* (Clemson, South Carolina: Clemson University Press, 2017) and Karen Steele, 'Irish Incognitos: Transnational Mobility in the National Tales of Maria Edgeworth and Sydney Owenson', *Éire-Ireland* 50.3 & 4 (Fall/Winter 2015), 94-112.

³ Maria Edgeworth, *Ormond: A Tale* (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1972), 11.

⁴ Ina Ferris, *The Romantic National Tale and the Question of Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 47.

⁵ Nicola Lloyd, "'Rebellion in the Celestial Empire: Sino-Irish Sympathy in Sydney Owenson's *Florence McCarthy*", *European Romantic Review* 27.1 (2016), 39-54 and Nicole Reynolds, 'Suicide, Romance and Imperial Rebellion: Sati and the Lucretia Story in Sydney Owenson's *The Missionary*', *Literature Compass* 12.12 2015, 675-682.

⁶ The term 'heterosexual plot' is used in place of 'romance plot' or 'marriage plot' throughout this essay, in order to clarify the manner in which not simply desire or legal union, but gendered alterity is the engine through which plots are formed and national, transnational and cultural economies are constructed in the novel of the long nineteenth century. See the 'Introduction' to Meredith Miller, *Feminine Subjects in Masculine Fiction: Modernity, Will and Desire, 1870-1910* (Palgrave 2013) for a more detailed discussion. For useful discussions of masculinity, sexuality and genre in the romantic era Irish novel, see Michèle Cohen, "'Manners Make the Man": Politeness, Chivalry and the Construction of Masculinity, 1750 to 1830, *Journal of British Studies* 44.2 (April 2005), 312-329, and Lisa Moore, 'Acts of Union: Sexuality and Nationalism, Romance and Realism in the Irish National Tale', *Cultural Critique* 44 (Winter 2000), 113-144.

⁷ Frances Burney, *Camilla* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 821.

⁸ Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 17.

⁹ Claire Connolly, *A Cultural History of the Irish Novel, 1790-1829* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹⁰ Ferris, *The Romantic National Tale and the Question of Ireland*.

¹¹ Connolly, *Cultural History of the Irish Novel*, 6.

¹² Michèle Cohen, "'Manners" Make the Man"', 315.

¹³ Reznicek, *The European Metropolis*.

¹⁴ Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism*, 131-132.

¹⁵ Claire Connolly, *Cultural History of the Irish Novel*, 7.

¹⁶ Claire Connolly, *Cultural History of the Irish Novel*, 22.

¹⁷ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 95-100.

¹⁸ See Matthew Reznicek, 'Absurd Speculations: The Tragedy of Development in Maria Edgeworth's *Ormond*', *Nineteenth-century Literature*, 71.3 (December 2016) 291-314 and Reznicek, 'Introduction' to *The European Metropolis*.

¹⁹ For related reception of these novels as *representative* of Ireland, see for example, 'O'Donnel, a National Tale', *Monthly Review, or Literary Journal* (May 1814), 110-111 and 'Harrington: a Tale and Ormond: a Tale', *Blackwood's* (September 1817), 631-635.

²⁰ Heather Braun, 'The Seductive Masquerade of *The Wild Irish Girl*: Disguising Political Fear in Sydney Owenson's National Tale' *Irish Studies Review* 13.1 (2005), 36.

²¹ Edgeworth, *Ormond*, 69.

²² Edgeworth, *Ormond*, 58.

²³ Edgeworth, *Ormond*, 57.

²⁴ For an alternate reading of these Harry Ormond's two patrons and their relation to national economies, focussed instead on Sir Ulick O'Shane, see Reznicek, 'Absurd Speculations'.

²⁵ Edgeworth, *Ormond*, 235-236.

²⁶ Edgeworth, *Ormond*, 350.

²⁷ Edgeworth, *Ormond*, 41.

²⁸ Edgeworth, *Ormond*, 117.

²⁹ Edgeworth, *Ormond*, 320.

³⁰ Edgeworth, *Ormond*, 399.

³¹ Edgeworth, *Ormond*, 400.

³² Edgeworth, *Ormond*, 398.

³³ Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism*, 14.

³⁴ *O'Donnel* quickly sold out a first printing of 2000 copies and was in its third edition by 1817. See Mary Campbell, *Lady Morgan: The Life and Times of Sydney Owenson* (London: Pandora, 1988), 127; Robert Lee Woolf, 'Introduction' to *O'Donnel* (New York and London: Garland, 1979), v-xxvi; 'New Novels', *Oxford University and City Herald* (June 1816), 1. A contemporary reviewer sets the two novelists side by side as the best 'fictitious Irish historians of the present day', 'O'Donnel: a National Tale', *Augustan Review* (May 1816), 518-520.

³⁵ Sydney Owenson, *Lady Morgan, O'Donnel: a National Tale*, three volumes (New York and London: Garland, 1979), 1.153.

³⁶ See Thomas Gray, 'The Bard. A Pindaric Poem' in *Odes by Mr Gray* (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1757)

³⁷ Owenson, *O'Donnel: a National Tale*, 1.155.

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- ³⁸ Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism*, 143.
- ³⁹ Owenson, *O'Donnel: a National Tale*, 1.258.
- ⁴⁰ Owenson, *O'Donnel: a National Tale*, 1.184.
- ⁴¹ Owenson, *O'Donnel: a National Tale*, 1.278-279, italics original.
- ⁴² cf Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel,' in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981) 3-40.
- ⁴³ Owenson, *O'Donnel: a National Tale*, 2.4.
- ⁴⁴ Karen Steele, 'Irish Incognitos: Transnational Mobility in the National Tales of Maria Edgeworth and Sydney Owenson', *Éire-Ireland*, 50.3&4, (Fall/Winter 2015), 99.
- ⁴⁵ See Campbell, *Lady Morgan*, 130-133.
- ⁴⁶ Owenson, *O'Donnel: a National Tale*, 3.43.
- ⁴⁷ Owenson, *O'Donnel: a National Tale*, 3.141.
- ⁴⁸ Owenson, *O'Donnel: a National Tale*, 3.144.
- ⁴⁹ Owenson, *O'Donnel: a National Tale*, 3.231.
- ⁵⁰ Owenson, *O'Donnel: a National Tale*, 3.232.
- ⁵¹ Owenson, *O'Donnel: a National Tale*, 3.100.
- ⁵² Owenson, *O'Donnel: a National Tale*, 3.59.
- ⁵³ Owenson, *O'Donnel: a National Tale*, 3.118, italics original.
- ⁵⁴ Owenson, *O'Donnel: a National Tale*, 3.301.
- ⁵⁵ Owenson, *O'Donnel: a National Tale*, 3.332.
- ⁵⁶ 'Eglantine, or, the Family of Fortescue: a Novel', *Augustan Review* (October 1816), 363.
- ⁵⁷ Ferris, *The Romantic National Tale and the Question of Ireland*, 69. See also Frank Donoghue, *The Fame Machine: Book Reviewing and Eighteenth-Century Literary Careers* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

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