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The Didacticism of Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent*

GERRY H. BROOKES

Castle Rackrent is often preferred among Maria Edgeworth's works because it seems a creation free of her usual didacticism, a slice of Irish life presented without comment. "In *Castle Rackrent*," says O. Elizabeth McWhorter Harden, "Miss Edgeworth drew directly from nature; only in *Castle Rackrent* was she a poet."¹ In her recent major biography, *Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography*, Marilyn Butler argues that the story "evolved from a fairly elaborate verbal imitation of a real man" and that the details of the story are arranged, in contrast with her usual practice, around "the character sketch of Thady rather than a didactic theme."² Yet there is another view of *Castle Rackrent*, that the book is a powerful condemnation of Irish landlords. Thomas Flanagan, for example, calls the story, "as final and damning a judgment as English fiction has ever passed on the abuse of power and the failure of responsibility."³

Flanagan seems closer to the truth here. The story is not a spontaneous imitation of natural events; its subject matter is plainly shaped and carefully evaluated.⁴ While the story lacks the explicit moralizing of many of Edgeworth's works, *Castle Rackrent* is implicitly and forcefully didactic, and its success lies in the unique harmony Edgeworth achieved among intention, subject matter, and form.

¹*Maria Edgeworth's Art of Prose Fiction* (The Hague, 1971), pp. 70-71; cited hereafter as Harden. This view can also be found in Emily Lawless, *Maria Edgeworth* (New York, 1904), p. 87; Roger McHugh, "Maria Edgeworth's Irish Novels," *Studies*, 27 (1938), 558; Stephen Gwynn, *Irish Literature and Drama in the English Language: A Short History* (London, 1936), p. 52; P. H. Newby, "The Achievement of Maria Edgeworth," *Listener*, 41 (1949), 987; W. L. Renwick, *English Literature, 1789-1815*, vol. 9 of *The Oxford History of English Literature* (Oxford, 1963), p. 74.

²Oxford, 1972), p. 435 and p. 240; cited as Butler.

³*The Irish Novelists, 1800-1850* (New York, 1959), p. 68. For similar views see Horatio Sheafe Krans, *Irish Life in Irish Fiction* (1903; rpt. New York, 1966), p. 29; and Christine Longford, "Maria Edgeworth and Her Circle," *Irish Writing*, No. 6 (1948; rpt. Nendeln/Liechtenstein: Kraus Reprint, 1970), p. 73.

⁴Still, many critics end up trying to conflate these two views of the book. Bruce Teets, for example, in his "Introduction" to *Castle Rackrent*, Univ. of Miami Critical Studies, No. 4 (Coral Gables, Fla., 1964), argues that the book is a "direct transcript from life without any overt theory or moralizing," yet "back of Thady's tale is the implicit moral belief that excess finally leads to disaster" (pp. 22, 25-26).

Castle Rackrent is an act of exemplifying. It is a kind of apologue or moral fable, designed to demonstrate by means of fictional examples that through "quickness, simplicity, cunning, carelessness, dissipation, disinterestedness, shrewdness, and blunder" the Rackrent family has succeeded in destroying its members, its estate, and its dependents, and in disrupting the social order on which its position has depended.⁵ *Castle Rackrent* is didactic in form in that it takes its shape from a thesis about or attitudes toward the Irish predicament, not from, say, a plot.⁶ Its form is coherent, and the story is plainly a made thing that does not simply reflect the shapelessness of life. For example, the episodic nature of the narrative, which has seemed to some a sign of lack of coherence, is essential to the form. The whole disaster, Edgeworth shows, is brought about by men with certain traits of character operating in a degenerate social order. And an episodic narrative is essential to exemplifying different men with analogous traits causing decline in the family's fortune through time.

The understanding and attitudes that Edgeworth shapes toward these fictional examples are by no means simple. The reader is led to think that the character of the Irish past and the remains of that past in the present render Irish landlords and their tenants particularly unfit to cope with the present, especially in the form of the self-aggrandizing cunning of a Jason Quirk, the middleman.⁷ On the other hand, Edgeworth shows that the Irish, self-destructive as they have been, are more colorful, eccentric, and interesting than those who take advantage of them and than the "British manufacturers" who may come after the Union to offer Ireland at least decent management (p. 63). Furthermore, the vestiges of feudal virtues, resident in the social order, which the Rackrents travesty by their

⁵*Castle Rackrent*, in vol. 4 of *Tales and Novels* (1893; rpt. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1969), The Longford Edition, p. 63. All references to *Castle Rackrent* are to this volume, and references to *Tales and Novels* are to this edition. References to *Castle Rackrent* have been checked for significant variations against George Watson's superior edition of the 1800 text (London, 1964).

⁶I have in mind Sheldon Sacks's definition of an apologue "as a fictional example of the truth of a formulable statement or a series of such statements," in *Fiction and the Shape of Belief: A Study of Henry Fielding, With Glances at Swift, Johnson, and Richardson* (Berkeley, 1964), p. 26. This volume will be cited as Sacks. It seems useful to think of apologues as effecting an "attitude" in the reader, which can be represented by a formulation of the "statement" exemplified and a description of the emotions attendant upon that "statement."

⁷In "An Early 'Irish' Novelist," in *Minor British Novelists*, ed. Charles Alva Hoyt (Carbondale, 1967), W. B. Coley says that Edgeworth's "theme is the effect of the past upon the present, particularly as manifested in lingering and ineffective traditions or ingrained cultural habits" (p. 22). He argues that the novel is regional but not historical, especially when compared with Scott's novels.

conduct, will also be lost entirely. While these virtues, especially loyalty, honor, bravery, a sense of family and place, and generosity, are present largely as values that the Rackrents have no longer or have only in a debased form, the reader may regret their passing. Edgeworth is less sentimental about them than Scott or Burke, more firmly on the side of industry and a pedestrian order, but she does use them to help measure the fall of the Rackrents and to help locate the condition of the Irish she represents.

The reader's understanding of the situation of these characters is qualified by the attitudes created by Edgeworth's examples. The characters are consistently foolish, but the destruction they work on themselves, and on those around them, is more than even they deserve.⁸ The effect of *Castle Rackrent* is 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 in turn caused by their own traits of character and encouraged by the degenerate social system they have inherited.

These ideas and attitudes are exemplified by an episodic history of the decline of the Rackrent family, beginning with the assumption of the name by Sir Patrick and ending with its demise at the death of Sir Condy. Each generation has its particular vices. Sir Patrick is a genial entertainer and powerful drinker. He dies in a fit after a drinking bout, belying the song he sang earlier in the evening about the relative virtue of going to bed drunk. He is imprudent in his liquor and in his management of the estate, and at the last his corpse is seized for his debts.

His successor, Sir Murtagh, is a hard, penurious man, who refuses to ransom his father's body, on the dubious ground that he would pay debts of honor, but since the law was involved, it was no longer a question of honor. Sir Murtagh further distinguishes himself by making the first of the family's succession of bad marriages. He weds a Puritanical Miss Skinflint, who turns out to be more penny-pinching than he. Though they disagree about Sir Murtagh's proclivity for good food, they cooperate to make life miserable for the tenantry, taking advantage of them in every available way. He hastens his own ruin, however, through numerous foolish law suits, and dies of a broken blood vessel, provoked by an argument with his wife about an abatement. She and the money for which he married her

⁸In *The Heyday of Sir Walter Scott* (New York, 1961), Donald Davie argues that Edgeworth's historical understanding of her characters' situation allows her to sympathize with them, against her rationalist and doctrinal bent (pp. 65-67).

survive him, and the healthy jointure she takes with her debilitates the estate further.

Sir Kit, Sir Murtagh's younger brother, and heir to Castle Rackrent, displays different vices. He is a young rake and milks the tenants through an agent to support his prodigal ways. He, too, marries badly for money, and his abused Jewish wife survives him. His way with women leads directly to his death at the hands of a representative of the third woman who claimed he had made false promises to her.

Sir Condy, the last Rackrent, is a throwback to Sir Patrick, whom he honors with a new tombstone. He chooses to marry for money, rather than for love, by flipping a coin. This wife is wasteful and extravagant, and she brings him to the brink of ruin. Showing some cunning, he saves himself briefly by getting elected to Parliament, free of his debtors' claims. The progressive financial ruin of the estate falls full upon him, and he dies abandoned by all.

Each character has his own weaknesses, and they all share the inability to manage their lives and their property. Regardless of their attitude toward the estate and its tenants, generous in Sir Patrick's and Sir Condy's cases, careless in Sir Kit's, and predatory in Sir Murtagh's, each manages Castle Rackrent badly, creating a legacy of waste and debt. Their attempts to compensate for their stupidity and incompetence by marrying wealth are in each case frustrated and self-destructive. Especially in marriage the family makes itself susceptible to fortune or "luck," represented most graphically in Sir Condy's act of flipping a coin to decide whom he will marry.

The family also makes itself susceptible to Jason Quirk, who rises with a vengeance from the side of his father, the faithful family retainer, to near control of the estate. Jason is not a paragon of business virtues set against the wastefulness of his former masters, but he has a kind of managerial cunning which they lack and to which they render themselves victims. He is selfish and self-aggrandizing, a wholly unattractive figure. He is, however, important in Edgeworth's scheme to show both how the Rackrent family destroys itself and what agencies will hasten that destruction. She uses Jason as an agent of the family's ruin and also to control the reader's attitudes toward the Rackrent family. As suggested above, the family represents vestiges of a social order that is degenerate and obsolete. This older order, however, even in its degenerate state, is colorful, eccentric, occasionally generous and honorable. Its perpetuation, on the other hand, is dangerous, because it causes suffering among the tenantry, because it is wasteful and self-destructive, and because it creates and encourages aggressive, selfish men like Jason. The passing of the old order with its scant virtues and astonishing eccentricity would be less

mourned if one had any assurance that a better order than Jason's would succeed it. Edgeworth holds out some hope in the end: "It is a problem of difficult solution to determine, whether an Union will hasten or retard the amelioration of this country. The few gentlemen of education, who now reside in this country, will resort to England: they are few, but they are in nothing inferior to men of the same rank in Great Britain. The best that can happen will be the introduction of British manufacturers in their places" (p. 63). But it seems a meager hope.

The effect of *Castle Rackrent* is intellectual and ethical. The story presents examples which provoke understanding and judgment. The effect is also emotional. Edgeworth constructs her narrative in such a way that the reader is made to laugh at and also to pity the Irish characters from a felt position of superiority. This response is shaped by the facts of the narrative, the action and speech of the characters and the rewards and punishments accorded them. It is also evoked by the artful manipulation of the voice of Thady Quirk, the loyal servant who narrates the tale.

Thady has always been recognized as Edgeworth's finest achievement, and he is crucial to the effects of her apologue. First of all, he is used as an example of the ways in which the wastefulness of the Rackrent family affects those who depend on them.⁹ As he tells us, he has descended from "Honest Thady" through "Old Thady" to "Poor Thady" as a result of the family's decline. He is also useful to Edgeworth in bringing to bear loyalty and a sense of family as ideals that the Rackrents fail to abide by.¹⁰

More importantly, Thady represents an affecting kind of mental and moral confusion that is at the heart of the predicament of the Irish characters in this story. The confusion manifests itself in several ways, in the ironic, implicit judgments that Edgeworth makes of characters through Thady, in the kinds of errors in judgment and

⁹Harden and Butler, among others, see Thady as the cause of *Castle Rackrent*, following Edgeworth's hint, mentioned below, about hearing an old steward's voice as she wrote. The insistence that Thady is primary in the tale, that he is represented from the life, and that the tale is less moralistic than her other works, makes it difficult for these critics to see the implications of their indirect perceptions of the didactic intention of this story.

¹⁰Thomas Flanagan in *The Irish Novelists* says that "it is Thady who creates the illusion of family, out of the feudal retainer's pride in the house which he serves" (p. 77). This illusion is part of the tension of what Flanagan sees as a plotted novel not as an apologue (See Sacks's first chapter for a discussion of this distinction). Flanagan gives an account of Edgeworth's narrative as "an almost perfect work of fiction," whose purpose "is to bring to life, by plot and symbol, a society which was destroyed by self-deception" (p. 69). Flanagan is right about the purpose of *Castle Rackrent*, but not the means. The powerful plot he describes is not embodied there.

sense that Thady makes that reflect solely on him, and in his uncomprehending narration of the stupidity of others. In *Essay on Irish Bulls*, prepared with her father's help, Edgeworth defines a bull as "a laughable confusion of ideas."¹¹ This description captures the state of the Irish mind in *Castle Rackrent*, except that our response to it is not simply laughter, but laughter mixed with pity. Thady himself commits a number of bulls.¹² His remark that the Rackrents' old family name was "O'Shaughlin, related to the kings of Ireland—but that was before my time" is an example. Here Thady's naïve confusion about the past is innocent and laughable enough, but his kind of confusion is continuous with more serious sorts that are both laughable and pitiable.

Sir Tallyhoo Rackrent's situation, for example, is more serious. He "had a fine estate of his own, only never a gate upon it, it being his maxim that a car was the best gate. Poor gentleman! he lost a fine hunter and his life, at last, by it, all in one day's hunt" (p. 2). The confusion manifests itself here in a form like wit. The shift in sense of the verb "lost" between its first object, "hunter," and the second, "life," and, more importantly, the violation of the reader's expectations by the second object, is a kind of zeugma. The casual tidiness with which his carelessness is avenged is likewise surprising, unsettling, and amusing, though one glimpses uneasily through the laughter a world in which hunters and lives are lost with nearly equal regret, "all in one day's hunt." The world the characters inhabit is like this, a vengeful world. The consequences of carelessness, of improvidence, are severe. And these consequences, the reader sees, attend mental and moral confusion of the sort that Edgeworth represents in Thady's speech and in what he reports. Being led to judgment, through laughter and pity, makes the reader aware of an intelligence arranging the fictions before him, makes him aware of what Wayne Booth has called the "implied author," that is, the author implicit in the style and form of the story.¹³ And Thady is one of the main devices by which judgments of characters and events are caused. The wit involved in Thady's witless narration makes the

¹¹*Tales and Novels*, 4:85. References to *Irish Bulls* are to this volume.

¹²In "Style and Purpose in Maria Edgeworth's Fiction," *NCF*, 23 (1968-1969), 265-278, Joanne Altieri discusses the ways in which Thady's speech and state of mind resemble that of the creator of bulls, as described in *Irish Bulls*. Although Altieri obscures the idea, implicit in parts of her essay, that the form of *Castle Rackrent* is didactic, much of what she says complements the arguments made here. Ernest A. Baker, in *Edgeworth, Austen, Scott*, vol. 6 of *The History of the English Novel* (London, 1929), 30-31, also discusses Thady's bulls.

¹³*The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago, 1961), pp. 70-77.

reader feel superior to its perpetrator, makes him share with the author the sense of superiority of a mind ordered sufficiently to see the mistake that is being made. The reader is made to think that, in such circumstances, he would know better.

In *Irish Bulls* the Edgeworths show that bulls are closely related to rhetorical figures and that the susceptibility of the Irish to bulls is related directly to their habitual use of colorful language. In *Castle Rackrent* the characters are victimized by their figurative language to some extent, and at the same time they are made more interesting and attractive by it. The bulls in *Castle Rackrent* place the reader in the position of the critic of rhetoric who knows the figures and where they have gone awry. When Thady remarks that Jason sticks to Sir Condy, as Thady “could not have done at the time, if you’d have given both the Indies and Cork to boot,” he creates an example of bathos (p. 48). Yet the humor of his remark is assimilated, as is true throughout, to the particular thesis of *Castle Rackrent*. Thady’s bathetic bull is rooted in his parochialism, which is one cause of the Irish predicament.

In a footnote Edgeworth informs us of another “mode of rhetoric common in Ireland” (p. 70). Thady has remarked of Sir Murtagh, “Out of forty-nine suits which he had, he never lost one but seventeen” (p. 7). Edgeworth notes that in such cases, “an astonishing assertion is made in the beginning of a sentence, which ceases to be in the least surprising, when you hear the qualifying explanation that follows” (p. 70). The remarkable achievement of Sir Murtagh turns out, as usual, not to be remarkable at all. Some of the humor of *Castle Rackrent* depends on figurative language, of the sort that concerns the Edgeworths in *Irish Bulls*, but much of it is syntactical humor, of the sort just quoted.¹⁴ Words and phrases are arranged in order to create expectations of one sort that are then undercut by implications of a different sort. Some examples of this kind of wit are periodic sentences. Thady says of Sir Condy, “Born to little or no fortune of his own, he was bred to the bar; at which, having many friends to push him, and no mean natural abilities of his own, he doubtless would, in process of time, if he could have borne the drudgery of that study, have been rapidly made king’s counsel, at the least; but things were disposed of otherwise, and he never went the circuit but twice, and then made no figure for want of a fee, and being unable to speak in public” (p. 23). The accumulating qualifications here are devastating. Pretentious expectations for Sir Condy are set up and then

¹⁴For further discussion of syntax in *Castle Rackrent*, see Joanne Altieri, “Style and Purpose in Maria Edgeworth’s Fiction.”

destroyed by the pathetic and laughable actualities of his abilities and situation.

The wit of figures and syntax is consistently heightened by the larger context of the reader's increasingly more comprehensive vision of the mental and moral confusion of the Irish. Edgeworth presents to the reader a series of examples of men making both errors in judgment, which reveal themselves as verbal foolishness, and errors in action, based on mistaken judgment. In *Irish Bulls* Edgeworth's phrase for the latter is "practical bulls" (p. 122). The practical bulls committed by the Rackrents are the most likely acts of confusion to create pity as well as laughter in the reader, because they have effects on persons and because they bring severe punishment on their perpetrators. Sir Kit's fate is probably the worst, and Edgeworth catches his misery in a phrase. In good spirits, he lets an opponent off in a duel, knocking a tooth-pick out of his fingers. But, "unluckily," he is hit himself "in a vital part, and was brought home, in a little better than an hour after the affair, speechless on a hand-barrow, to my lady" (p. 19). He has done what his family constantly does, exposed himself to luck. Sir Condy gambles in choosing a wife and later gambles on his wife's death. Sir Murtagh goes to law, and, as a footnote tells us, that is a kind of lottery (p. 74). Relying on luck in the providential world of an Edgeworth tale is tempting the rational god of industry in the worst possible way. Salvation in her stories comes through all of the qualities missing in the Irish of *Castle Rackrent*, through honesty, patience, industry, practical knowledge, humility.¹⁵ No one is rewarded much in *Castle Rackrent* because no one has the requisite virtues, but we are meant to feel their absence. We are meant to think Ireland needed those "few gentlemen of education who now reside in this country," needed, Edgeworth must have thought, practical people like herself and her father.

Castle Rackrent is, then, an act of exemplifying, and its parts are shaped to demonstrate the truth of Edgeworth's view of the situation of the Irish and to create an ethical and emotional attitude toward them and their predicament. The story does not simply represent but evaluates through a variety of rhetorical means.

This description of the form of the work has several uses. First of all, describing the story as an apologue, as something different from

¹⁵In *Ennui*, Lord Y——, with Edgeworth's obvious sanction, says, "I hold that we are the artificers of our own fortune. If there be any whom the gods wish to destroy, these are first deprived of understanding; whom the gods wish to favour, they first endow with integrity, inspire with understanding, and animate with activity," *Tales and Novels*, 4:387.

most of the works we call novels, can preserve us from seeing certain qualities of the book, such as inconsistencies in the representation of Thady and the episodic nature of the narrative, as weaknesses in it.¹⁶ It can also prevent us from looking for qualities of plot normally found in novels. In *Maria Edgeworth the Novelist, 1767-1849: A Bicentennial Study*, James Newcomer, in order to explain Thady's incredible combination of naïveté at times and his remarkable shrewdness at others, argues that, in fact, Thady is shrewd and deceitful throughout, that he plots in collusion with his son to overthrow the Rackrent family.¹⁷ This view plainly misuses evidence, but it is the sort of explanation encouraged by a misperception of the form of the tale and by a misunderstanding of the principles operating within it.¹⁸ If one looks for qualities ordinarily found in novels, consistent development of character, suspense about the fates of characters, then one will be led to extravagant theses like Newcomer's, or one will conclude that this is a badly managed novel.

This description of *Castle Rackrent* as an apologue clarifies both why the work is not objective and historical and why it is taken to be so. The story may represent a view of a particular historical situation that is accurate and can be tested empirically, but our appreciation of its having done so is external to our apprehension of the form of the story. Edgeworth presents fictional examples and not history. Her intention is to shape our attitudes and beliefs toward what we perceive as fictional men in fictional situations and to urge us to make the same judgment of actual men in actual situations. This distinction is crucial for understanding the form of the book and the working of that form. As mentioned above, most of those who argue that the book is a direct portrait of Irish life acknowledge that the picture that comes full blown through the neutral medium of the artist is, somehow, not a flattering one. Ernest A. Baker, for example, in *The History of the Novel*, says that Edgeworth "gave imagination full fling, and did not let any idea of a purpose interfere, although the favorite moral theme is implicit, the nemesis of self-indulgence, extravagance, and folly, as it must needs be in such a register of

¹⁶Thady seems inconsistent, for example, when he says at one point that he knows nothing of law and later shows considerable knowledge of it (pp. 7, 24-25). One can see that Edgeworth sacrifices apparent consistency in the latter instance for the purpose of representing the tenuousness of Sir Condy's situation, banking on a prospective inheritance, and of showing, as her footnote tells us, the skill of the Irish poor in law (p. 74).

¹⁷Texas Christian Univ. Monographs in Hist. and Cult., No. 2 (Fort Worth, 1967), pp. 144-167.

¹⁸See the attack on Newcomer's use of evidence in Harden, pp. 55n-56n.

tragedy" (p. 28). But the work is purposeful, and our understanding and pleasure are dependent on our perception of that didactic, exemplificative purpose. We are stirred by what we perceive as examples of mental and moral confusion. The "moral theme" is not simply "implicit"; it is the cause of our pleasure in reading.

Castle Rackrent is not history, not a psychological case study, not a work which by its form demands empirical verification. If we say, even hypothetically, that it is an apologue, then we can deduce that the characters, including the narrator, will serve the attitudes being shaped. They will seem life-like or take on the kinds of expectations we have for characters in most novels only up to the point at which those features interfere with exemplification of the central attitudes.¹⁹ We can deduce, for example, that what Thady says will be determined by a desire to represent character but that representation of his character will be subordinated to a need to exemplify certain ideas and to shape attitudes. In reading history or a psychological case history, we would perceive this shaping as a flaw. In the case of *Castle Rackrent* the perception that the author is creating and shaping fictional examples is inescapable, and it allows the form to work.

Writing history would make demands on Edgeworth that she does not have to fulfill. She has greater ease in inventing and arranging examples than a historian has. She can create a narrator with some qualities of regional speech and ignorance, but she can manipulate his voice to serve her purpose. In fact, the manipulation of his voice is one of the clues, necessary to her form, that we are reading fiction and not history. The attitudes embedded by the story may be treated subsequently against the actual, and if they hold up, then we will say that she has provided us with a proper historical view.²⁰ The power of this form is that it can provide us with complex attitudes that we seem to have induced from particular examples, so that when we turn to the actual, we know what sorts of evidence will confirm our now deductive model.

Edgeworth's ability to make us induce from fictional examples ideas that seem plausible when tested against the actual is one cause of the view that she has written history. Another cause is her ability to create life-likeness within the confines of her form. She cannot allow Thady to become as absorbing or as boring as an actual Irishman

¹⁹This rule is stated in Sacks, p. 60n.

²⁰In *Irish Life in Irish Fiction*, Horatio S. Krans seems to come to such a conclusion. He says that the narrative "is a faithful picture of a national disorder in an acute stage, which, running its course, in a few generations wound up the career of a good part of the old families of the land" (p. 29).

might be, but she can and does make him vivid and engaging, while he serves the exemplificative and evaluative functions essential to the form. There are two other apparent reasons for thinking she might be representing the actual. The first is the constant reference of her notes and glossary to the actual. They insist that the fictions are not implausible since real events like them have occurred. They tend to generalize her examples, and they encourage testing the hypothetical view of the Irish situation created by the story against historical occurrences. The second reason is Edgeworth's own insistence that the story came to her spontaneously, that she heard the voice of an old steward speaking to her and simply recorded it.²¹ This external evidence is usually linked with two other observations to create an explanation of the genesis of the story that makes it seem simply a slice of life. *Castle Rackrent* was written without the aid or interference, depending on your point of view, of her father, and it lacks the explicit moralizing of her other works, virtually all of which she wrote under his guidance. Free of her father's restraining hand, this romantic argument goes, she could see life clearly and record it without comment.²² To the contrary she seems to have been free to create a more successful didactic form which embedded judgments and attitudes in examples and did not grind to a halt, as many of her other stories do, to make explicit what is (or ought to be) implicit in her fictions.

Behind the traditional uneasiness about the relation of *Castle Rackrent* to Edgeworth's other works may also be a notion that it is not didactic because it does not display virtue. The story shows, as Dr. Johnson thought narratives should, "that vice is the natural consequence of narrow thoughts, that it begins in mistake, and ends in ignominy," but it does not, as the Doctor would have it, exemplify virtue, except by its absence. To some extent the demands of what Dr. Johnson calls "historical veracity" militated against the display of virtue.²³ Still, the lack of neoclassical moral balance may be a source of continued uneasiness about the work.²⁴ In 1803 Richard Lovell

²¹See her letter to Mrs. Stark of September 6, 1834 in *Maria Edgeworth: Chosen Letters*, ed. F. V. Barry (Boston, n.d.), p. 243.

²²In "A Dozen of Novels," *Fraser's*, 9 (1834), 483-484, Thackeray works a perverse variation on this argument, reasoning that since working alone after her father's death, she wrote a dull novel, *Helen*, then her father must have written the lively Irish novels.

²³"No. 4," *The Rambler*, ed. W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss, vol. 3 of *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven and London, 1969), pp. 24-25. Harden shows schematically the kind of balance that Edgeworth gives her examples of virtue and vice in her story, "Waste Not, Want Not," and that she employs with more or less symmetry in most of her fiction (Harden, pp. 24-25).

²⁴This neoclassical balance takes a Utilitarian form in the Edgeworths' thinking. In

Edgeworth remarked somewhat defensively, "What we have already published has always tended to improve the education of our country: even *Castle Rackrent* has that object remotely in mind."²⁵ The emphasis on vice and not on virtue in the tale is enough to explain his hesitation about the story. He does recognize its didactic nature, and there seems to be no evidence to support Marilyn Butler's claim that *Castle Rackrent* is fundamentally different from Maria Edgeworth's other books, that the story is not coherent because Thady's character takes precedence over the author's progressive point of view, and that the Edgeworths rejected the tale, at least for a time, because it did not say what Maria Edgeworth wished (see Butler, esp. pp. 306-307, 359-360). Instead the Edgeworths seem to have recognized its nature and power quite clearly and to have been visibly relieved, as they say in *Irish Bulls*, that the "generosity" of the Irish had let *Castle Rackrent* among them be "generally taken merely as good-humoured raillery, not as insulting satire" (p. 184). The risk that the Irish might take the book more seriously is, of course, implicit in the intention it embodies.

Castle Rackrent stands out from Edgeworth's other stories, not, as some have claimed, by being non-didactic, but by the particular harmony in it of intention, subject matter, and form. The importance of her subject matter should not be overlooked. As Joanne Altieri has shown, Edgeworth's subjects here permit her greater verbal play and more complex stylistic effects than do the more rational subjects of her other stories. Of course, our pleasure in the vernacular is complicated further by the evaluations of it and its speakers that are implicit in every level of the form, especially in syntax and situation.

Many of her stories go awry because they fail to embody a coherent intention and are perceived as mixed or flawed forms. Her apologies are marred by their tendency to break out into plotted novels, into imitations of actions, and her plotted novels are marred by her persistent desire to reduce the complexity of human interactions to aphoristic examples. *The Absentee*, to take an obvious case, is flawed formally because Edgeworth's desire to exemplify the need for absentee Irish landlords to return to their land interferes with her efforts to create hopes and fears for the fate of that paragon, Lord Colambre. There is little doubt that he will succeed in everything he

Practical Education, 2nd ed. (London, 1801), III, 291, they write: "'The general principle,' that we should associate pleasure with whatever we wish that our pupils should pursue, and pain with whatever we wish that they should avoid, forms, our readers will perceive, the basis of our plan of education."

²⁵Letter to Lady Spencer, May 11, 1803, quoted in Butler, pp. 286-287.

desires, and the plot focuses instead on how he will achieve it. The signals, however, are so clear that happiness resides on the land in Ireland, that one knows all he has to do is to lure his family home. Then, of course, some fortuitous circumstance will reveal Grace Nugent's legitimacy, and all will be well. Edgeworth's faith in the power of virtuous conduct to regulate human affairs and to create happiness is so strong that she has difficulty in making her reader feel satisfaction in seeing a foregone conclusion work itself out. Her beliefs work against subtle plots and encourage a tendency to exemplify. When, for example, Colambre asks a friend whether he should join the army, he cannot ask about his own situation: "Would you advise me—I won't speak of myself, because we judge better by general views than by particular cases—would you advise a young man at present to go into the army?" (*Tales and Novels*, 6:222). Her consistent interest is in general views.

Vice, however, seems not to be bound by such rigid rules, and it constantly enlivens her stories, even the moral fables intended to instruct the young.²⁶ There her evil characters, since they are motivated by probability rather than moral necessity, create suspense that distracts, happily, from the ideas she is trying to exemplify. Hazlitt remarked that except for *Castle Rackrent* her stories "are a kind of pedantic, pragmatism common sense, tintured with the pertness and pretensions of the paradoxes to which they are so self-complacently opposed."²⁷ In *Castle Rackrent* she manages harmony between her evaluation of the Irish situation and the fictions she creates to exemplify it. Her examples correspond to the complexity of her view and give us complex pleasure.²⁸

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²⁶In *Children's Books in England: Five Centuries of Social Life*, 2nd ed. (1958; rpt. Cambridge, 1970), pp. 141-144, F. J. Harvey Darton gives an account of his reading of Edgeworth's "The Purple Jar" that represents accurately the difficulties readers are likely to have with many of her apologues, where she does not succeed in controlling the reader's expectations and desires and subsuming them to her moral purpose, as she does succeed in doing in *Castle Rackrent*.

²⁷*Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, vol. 6 of *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, Centenary Edition (London, 1931), p. 123.

²⁸The view of the story presented here is further evidence in support of the idea that Edgeworth offered Sir Walter Scott a formal model for his apologues, as well as models for subject matter and characters, an idea developed by Professor Ralph W. Rader in lectures at the University of California, Berkeley. The idea is also sketched by Donald Davie in *The Heyday of Sir Walter Scott*. The nature of this influence and the nature of the historical apologue, the apologue that exemplifies a view of the past, deserve further study.