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## "I accuse Miss Owenson": The Wild Irish Girl as Media Event

by CLAIRE CONNOLLY

SYDNEY OWENSON may not have written the first Irish novel—that prize is conventionally accorded to *Castle Rackrent*, written by her near-contemporary Maria Edgeworth—yet it is possible to argue that she received the first Irish review. Novels had of course been reviewed in Ireland before Owenson (just as novels had been written in Ireland before Edgeworth) but this essay argues that the critical reception of her early novels, particularly *The Wild Irish Girl*, in the Dublin newspaper the *Freeman's Journal* constitutes a foundational moment in the history of Irish fiction, analogous to *Castle Rackrent's* innovative fusion of narrative experimentation with the politics of Union. In the attention centred on the enigmatic figure of its author, *The Wild Irish Girl* controversy generated an interpretative crux equivalent to the problem of Edgeworth's unreliable narrator Thady Quirk; Sydney Owenson herself became as much the object of argument and speculation as her fictional work.

*The Wild Irish Girl* was published in London late in the summer of 1806 and by December of that year had become the subject of controversy in Dublin. A letter appeared in the Dublin daily newspaper the *Freeman's Journal* on December 15, under the heading "Private Correspondence". Apologizing for disappointing readers expecting "a French Bulletin or the atrocities of a Thresher", the correspondent (barrister about town and aspiring Irish Tory John Wilson Croker, posing as "M.T.") raises "the subject" of Miss Owenson:

Fortune, that inexplicable deity, seems to have her favourites in literature, as well as in other pursuits, some of her votaries, diligent, studious and erudite, have known her, but by her frowns—while others, who careless in the acquisition of knowledge, are yet unceasing in their pretensions to it, partake of her smiles, and riot in her favours. In the latter class of defiance of opinion, predilection and taste, I shall not hesitate to place Miss Owenson the subject of my present address, conscious that her merits have been over-rated, and her arguments over-praised.—I shall endeavour to find the standard of the one and the medium of the other.—As in the legal professions, the indictment is first read, and then discussed—agreeable to established forms, I accuse Miss OWENSON of having written bad novels, and worse poetry—volumes without number, and verses without end—nor does my accusation rest upon her want of literary excellence—I accuse her of attempting to vitiate mankind—of attempting to undermine morality by sophistry—and that under the insidious mask of virtue, sensibility and truth. Such are the charges, which I am daring enough to bring forward, unawed by a host of treacherous sentimentalists.

Although it is *The Wild Irish Girl* that is the main target here, Owenson's two earlier novels, *St. Clair; or the Heiress of Desmond* (1803) and *The Novice of Saint Dominick* ("1805" [1806]) also come in for criticism. *St. Clair* in particular is accused of imitating Rousseau and Goethe and thus bringing French- and German-inspired doctrines of sensibility to bear on Irish life. The *Freeman's Journal* ran daily attacks, defences and counterattacks in a manner unheard of for any previous novel and the exchanges continued into the New Year and throughout 1807. The correspondence began to drop off in the autumn of 1807, and in December Owenson herself sent a letter to the *Freeman's*. Written in highly emotional language and laced with literary quotations, the letter solicited public sympathy for the painful plight of Dublin's poor (December 3, 1807).

John Wilson Croker's assault brought Owenson's private character and professional reputation under severe public scrutiny. Their enmity was both personal and political. She had responded in print to his recent attack on the Dublin stage. While he represented the interests of the entrenched Anglo-Irish oligarchy, her alliances were with the liberal and Whig factions. Croker went on to become one of the founders of the influential and politically conservative literary journal the *Quarterly Review* in London in 1809 (set up in opposition to the more liberal *Edinburgh Review*), helping to forge its reputation for slashing reviews when he devoted the pages of its first number to a jeering attack on Owenson's most recent novel, *Woman; or Ida of Athens* (1809).

Croker's anonymous *Familiar Epistles*, published in 1804, had targeted many of her father's friends, and supposedly brought about the death of one Irish actor (just as his later harsh review of *Endymion* in the *Quarterly* was said to have killed John Keats). His attack led to an outpouring of what Robert Owenson called *Theatrical Tears*. In answering Croker's criticisms of Irish theatre, Sydney Owenson's *A Few Reflections, Occasioned by the Perusal of a Work, entitled, "Familiar Epistles to Frederick J—s Esq., on the Present State of the Irish Stage"* refers to the "malicious tendency" of his comments (*A Few Reflections* 16). His adoption of the signature "M. T." may be in recognition of that earlier skirmish. Other correspondents speculated that M.T. meant "Meaningless trash", "Moral Tendency", "Moses Topkins"—"convicted some time ago . . . of uttering treasonable expressions" (*Freeman's Journal* 14 January 1807)—or, simply "Empty", as in this poem: "Empty! why declare your name? / The Initials, were so near the same" (*Freeman's Journal* 13 January 1807).

This essay sets out some explanatory frameworks within which what I wish to call *The Wild Irish Girl* media event can be read, and suggests some of the meanings yielded by this episode in the history of Irish fiction. But Sydney Owenson had her own interpretation, worth looking at first for its concise and dramatic sketch of a framework within which the political risks and rewards of novel writing in early nineteenth-century Ireland can be understood. Returning to the controversy in a preface to a revised version of

*The Wild Irish Girl* (published in 1846 and advertised as "written by Sydney Owenson, edited by Lady Morgan"), the author remembers the Dublin reception of what she describes as "the first attempt at a genuine Irish novel" as a triumph: the novel, she says, was "buoyed up into notice by the very means taken to sink it". As Owenson assembles a tableau of personal, political and national intrigue, however, she cannot resist presenting herself as a fugitive figure, fleeing party prosecution and finding refuge in the safe haven of Dublin Castle:

a gentleman as yet unknown to fame, who, under the signature of M.T. furnished the columns of a leading Irish journal with daily and almost vituperative attacks against the novel, and its author; so coincident were these animadversions with the prejudices and interests of the then ascendant party, that they must eventually have placed the author under the ban of social and literary proscription for ever, but for the timely championship of some of her gallant and liberal countrymen, and the countenance, kindness, and protection of the whole of the English members of the Irish government. (*The Wild Irish Girl* xxi)

Owenson's happy memories of the protection afforded to her by "the English members of the Irish government" refer primarily to the 6th Duke of Bedford, Lord Lieutenant (or Viceroy) of Ireland from 1806 to 1807, the English representative of the king and his government who was based in Dublin Castle. Bedford was the appointee of "the Ministry of all the Talents", the Whig coalition government formed by Charles Fox and Thomas Grenville in January 1806 when Prime Minister William Pitt (the younger) died, and thus the representative of English reformist ambitions. Traditionally the defenders of the Glorious Revolution and the Protestant Succession, the Whigs sought however to distance themselves from the "red-hot" attitudes associated with middle-class Irish Protestantism, especially the members of Dublin Corporation so closely linked with the notion of "Protestant Ascendancy". Their plans included tithe reform and a rather vaguely expressed desire to see increased legislative tolerance for Catholics, an explosive issue in Ireland even in the mildest of formulations. The legacy of the rebellions of 1798 and 1803 was the erection of seemingly unbreachable sectarian barriers in all areas of Irish life. Historians such as Thomas Bartlett and Kevin Whelan now credit this period with the dubious honour of bringing religious bigotry to bear across the political spectrum. The very whisper of reform earned Bedford the fierce suspicion of many Irish Protestants.

Croker's own career was a product of these insecure times, and it is possible to see how he personally benefited from the perceived need to prop up the forces of Irish Protestantism. In December of 1806 he stood for election in Downpatrick but lost. When a general election was called in 1807 (following the collapse of the Ministry of all the Talents), he stood again and won, but by a small majority. Thomas Bartlett has commented on how the 1807 general election "saw an identifiable Catholic interest appearing in numerous constituencies". In Downpatrick, Croker had to confront what Bartlett calls "the local Catholic interest directed against him": "The popery war-whoop

was sung against us", he wrote to Arthur Wellesley in May 1807, "but we outsang them". Croker's song had been sweetened by public funding to the tune of £2000, undoubtedly because of what was seen as a need to buttress the Protestant interest in Ireland (Bartlett 296). The period of *The Wild Irish Girl* media event thus saw the beginnings of Croker's parliamentary career and his development and cementing of influential political connections within an increasingly sectarian context.

Charles James Fox commented on coming to power that Ireland was "the country to which the application of liberal principles and what I will call *our* system of policy is most required" (McDowell 69). When the Duke of Bedford and his wife landed in Dublin to take office in April 1806, a poem published in the *Dublin Evening Post* hailed his arrival as heralding a new age of liberty. As "[a] Russell", his family connections made him "Sacred to Virtue's purest laws, / Sacred to Freedom's holy cause" (*Dublin Evening Post* 5 April 1806). Bedford was a liberal—"for a duke", as R.B. McDowell puts it—and his arrival created the impression that "an era of bold reform was about to begin" (McDowell 21, 69). By the end of 1807 Owenson had forged strategic alliances with the Whigs. Her use of these political connections is analogous to the close links between the career of Walter Scott and the fortunes of the Tory party. This alliance is clearly evidenced in Owenson's championing of the anti-tithe cause in the ninth of her *Patriotic Sketches*, published in November 1807, where she also honours the memory of Bedford's administration (*Patriotic Sketches* I, 102-43). This crusade was closely associated with the policies of the English Whigs from the 1780s onwards, and Bedford was in fact on the point of introducing tithe reform in Ireland when the Ministry of all the Talents fell (McDowell 20-21).

Croker may well have grasped some of this in embryo, and clearly felt that Owenson was a Party writer and thus a proper object of political attack. For a writer of popular fiction, albeit a woman, to be drawn directly into politics was not so unusual in this period. The administration of the Ministry of all the Talents generated a great number of fictional publications, on both sides of the Irish sea, devoted to exposing sexual intrigue and scandal. Peter Garside has shown how the period of the Whig administration actually coincides with a sharp rise in the production of fiction, peaking with a record high in 1808 (Garside 42). One such popular and widely known narrative was the memoirs of the notorious Mary Anne Clarke, infamous for having exploited her affair with the Duke of York (the Whigs' royal patron) to sell army commissions. Clarke's account of the Duke's trial before both Houses of Parliament on charges of political corruption and her own appearance before this formidable court contained a virulent attack on one of the prosecutors—none other than the new Irish M.P. John Wilson Croker—as a "ludicrous Irishman", a "peeping Tom" with social aspirations and a thick brogue (Clarke II: 275-85).

Thus, Croker's attacks on Owenson foreshadow some of his later criticisms of Bedford and Whig policies in Ireland, and may even be seen as a

preliminary flexing of political and critical muscle. According to Croker's *Sketch of the State of Ireland, Past and Present* (1808) Bedford was "by party connections unfitted for the station of viceroy" (Croker, *Sketch* 21). McDowell notes that the administration never wielded its new power with any great ease, with its reforming tendencies dissipated by efforts to win in the general election of 1806 and attempts "to prevent its catholic allies pressing their claims with unreasonable vehemence" (McDowell 69). McDowell's judgement, in fact, might take something of its tone from Croker, who sneered at the predicament in which the Whigs found themselves, as aristocrats in possession of "the disgraceful confidence of the disaffected in both countries". Croker loses no time in pointing out how the English Whigs were tainted with accusations of disloyalty post-1790s when the French revolution had raised the stakes of liberal politics. In a scene that is reminiscent of Maria Edgeworth's novel *The Absentee*, Croker depicts the "vulgar fellowship" of the reformers of post-Union Dublin:

At their exaltation, the intemperance of their late associates in Ireland knew no bounds: The advent of the Whig viceroy was hailed by voices that had before hailed the coming of the French. To his first levee crowded, in the levelling audacity of their joy, persons of every rank except the highest—of every description but the loyal: from their concealment or exile suddenly emerged the unexecuted patriots of 1798, bearding and insulting the very magistrates before whom they had been convicted: Some indiscreet legal promotions, some ill-advised civil appointments raised to confidence the hopes of these fanatics; but raised only to overthrow. The viceroy, awakened to his sense and dignity, and the chancellor, illustrious by his birth and talents, were disgusted at the vulgar fellowship, and alarmed at the traitorous insolence. (Croker, *Sketch* 22-23)

Croker's 1806 pamphlet/poem *The Amazoniad* repeats some of these denunciations, and also singles out for special censure the Bedfords' patronage of the Dublin theatre, presented as an expression of partisan sentiment (*The Amazoniad* vii, 13-15). The *Dublin Evening Post* reported in July of 1806 that the Theatre Royal had been fitted out in honour of the new Lord Lieutenant, and was now "superior, indeed, to any thing of the kind we have long time witnessed". In the aftermath of the Act of Union, the lord lieutenantancy became what Peter Gray calls "a contested constitutional site". Although calls for the abolition of the office were not audible until the 1820s, it is possible to see the relationship between Owenson and the Bedfords as an early attempt to exploit the contradictions newly inherent in an office meant to serve both the glory and the security of the state but uneasily split between these "dignified" and "efficient" constitutional functions. The role played by *The Wild Irish Girl* media event in highlighting ambivalences in the exercise of state power may even prefigure Daniel O'Connell's shrewd exploitation of both Tory and Whig viceroys later in the century (Gray).

Discussing Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, William Warner applies the late twentieth-century notion of a "media event" to one of the earliest eighteenth-century novels. Doing so allows him to convey the extent to which the success of Richardson's fiction was generated by, for and within the media, so that the event—and Warner stresses that the reviews, rip-offs and sequels

attendant on the publication of *Pamela* themselves constitute “a type of event rather than a simulation of one”—invites critical commentary (Warner 176, 179). My reading of *The Wild Irish Girl* controversy suggests that, like *Pamela*, Owenson’s novel became “an ambient, pervasive phenomenon” (Warner 178). No longer just a novel that one might read or not, both *The Wild Irish Girl* itself and the nature of its reception in the Dublin papers of 1806–07 became topics of widespread interest. See *The Wild Irish Girl*, ed. Connolly and Copley, for a full listing of contemporary reviews. Correspondents in the *Freeman’s Journal* frequently insist that they rarely (if ever) read novels, that they have not read all (or sometimes any) of Owenson’s fiction; but that they, nonetheless, have formed an opinion which, moreover, they think it best to share with other readers of the Dublin daily newspapers. Only days after the first accusations against Owenson appeared, the editor of the *Freeman’s* announced that it would devote space “to subjects solely of a literary nature” (*Freeman’s Journal* 18 December 1806). Appearing under the heading “LITERATURE”, and with the caveat that the editor himself never of course reads novels, this innovation indicates that *The Wild Irish Girl* was responsible for making popular fiction a matter to be discussed in the public press. On January 9, 1807 the editor once more reminded readers that, although he is too busy to “acquire an opinion by reading her books”, “[t]he discussions in favour and against Miss O—have attracted attention, and *they shall be continued*”. General letters on the topic of “literature”, which make no mention of Owenson or her novel, appeared on January 24 and February 5, signed by “T.C.S.” and “PATRIOTICUS” respectively.

On December 22, the newspaper informed readers that “[w]e have received two articles upon the subject of Miss Owenson, one in defence, the other from M.T., against the moral tendency of that lady’s productions, which shall appear, if possible, tomorrow”. Some days later, a further notice promised “The CRITIQUES of Miss Owenson early in the week” (*Freeman’s Journal* 27 December 1806). M.T.’s next letter to the Editor finally appeared on January 2, 1807, at which point it confidently referred to “this stage of the controversy on the tendency of Miss Owenson’s works”. The role of criticism itself—whether a subordinate and lesser form of writing or a means of cultural production in its own right—was to become a recurrent theme of the various contributions.

Owenson’s youth and sex were regularly invoked by her defenders. A reading of the event in gendered terms asserted itself, with not only Owenson’s femininity but Croker’s masculinity and indeed the character of the *Freeman’s* itself all held up to scrutiny. On January 3, 1807 the “Son of Ireland” wrote to the editor as follows:

The chasteness of a paper is the best security of its candour; and your’s having admitted a very unprovoked attack on a most amiable and ingenious young lady, I am very certain it will receive a reply with the same freedom and indulgence.

Rather than demand chivalry from Croker, however, the “Son of Ireland” accuses him of petty professional jealousy:

the puny pretender to wit is prompt to undervalue the talent that can detect his insufficiency . . . Like the angry Arab, who in hurling a pebble at a pyramid, confessed the elevation of the object, and the imbecility of his own arm.

"Somebody" (February 6, 1807) picks up on an earlier jibe of Croker's—that if Owenson is not feminine enough to blush at the adulation to be found in the *Freeman's Journal* (self-penned, he suggests), then the paper on which these praises were printed might almost do so—and claims that he had himself coloured with shame on reading the accusations. The same correspondent happily reports on "how powerless are the efforts of calumny to sully the white vestments of innocence". Youth and age also became organising metaphors in the discussion: "I am an old fellow", begins J. Hoadley, a friend of Robert Owenson's, on January 14, 1807; offering broadly the same view, however, as "a young fellow about town" (January 23, 1807). It is the "Son of Ireland", however, who offers the most graphic image of the relationship between writer and critic:

her "Wild Irish Girl" he will send to the House of Correction, where she is to be stripped and scourged, for presuming to inculcate the moral of benevolence and extinction of sectarian differences. Should he, however, succeed no better in his flagellation of the little hired Irish Girl, than in his late application of lash, he will find but few to applaud the vigour of the Beadle, and fewer to admire the dexterity of his arm. (*Freeman's Journal* 3 January 1807)

Claiming that Croker's attack on Owenson was not so much bad as badly done raises the issue of style and elevates it into a national principle. Croker himself exempts one of his adversaries ("Somebody") from the general censure because of his "easiness of style and elegance of diction" (*Freeman's Journal* 2 February 1807).

The controversy was by no means confined to letters to the editor. On January 5 an acrostic ("by a lady", and signed K.F.) appeared, which hailed Owenson's talents as a fitting subject for the writer's own "feeble verse". Many correspondents felt similarly inspired by the correspondence to write poetry and compose (mostly bad) puns. The controversy took on a commercial aspect, generating advertisements for Owenson's previous as well as forthcoming publications. On January 1, 1807 the *Dublin Evening Post* carried a notice for "Miss Owenson's Irish Melodies", "To be had at Holden's Music Shop, 26, Parliament-street". Owenson's *Twelve Hibernian Melodies* had already been published in 1805, but it would appear that the *Freeman's* letters generated a renewed interest in her work. Richard Phillips, the London-based publisher of *The Wild Irish Girl*, placed an advertisement in the *Freeman's* in April 1807, announcing *The Lay of an Irish Harp* along with a second edition of *The Novice of Saint Dominick*, her second novel, and a third edition of *The Wild Irish Girl*. In May of the same year Owenson is described in print as "THE ELEGANT AUTHORESS OF THE WILD IRISH GIRL", in a further advertisement for her "original poetry" (*The Lay of an Irish Harp*).

The best evidence for Owenson's own commercial exploitation of the *Freeman's* controversy is her staging of a new comic opera (*The First*



*Attempt, or the Whim of a Moment*) in Dublin during March and April of 1807, a production which, as I discuss below, seems to have been designed to extract maximum gain from the popular interest in both her writing and reputation. She used the occasion to bring her father, the retired actor-manager Robert Owenson, back on the stage also, casting him in a close copy of one of the stage Irish roles he had made famous earlier in his career. He went on to do a solo benefit performance in May 1807.

Unsurprisingly, the controversy gave a new lease of life to *The Wild Irish Girl* itself, and was surely responsible for the decision of Dublin jewellers, Brush and Son, to manufacture a "Glorvina ornament" and cloak, such as might have been worn by the heroine of the novel. Although it is unclear whether the author herself made any money from the Glorvina fashion phenomenon, there is no doubt that *The Wild Irish Girl* media event afforded Owenson both the opportunity and the means to manipulate the culture market of early nineteenth-century Dublin.

Croker spots one good example of what he calls (after Richard Brinsley Sheridan's classification of advertising strategies in his play *The Critic*) "a Puff direct" for Owenson's novel, *The Novice of Saint Dominick*. Explaining how he has just seen (another) "panegyric paragraph" on Owenson's prose appended to a print advertising *The Lay of an Irish Harp*, Croker exclaims in astonishment on reading "[t]hat the late Mr. PITT occupied the last hours of his life in reading Miss Owenson's admirable novel of 'The Novice of Saint Dominick'" (*Freeman's Journal* 17 January 1807). Croker's outrage that the reputation of the recently deceased former Prime Minister is fodder for Owenson's publicity machine can be read in the light of Pitt's public reputation in post-Union Ireland. Pitt wished to follow up the Act of Union with government measures for Catholic relief. The king, George III, declared himself implacably opposed to Catholic emancipation and the ensuing row resulted in Pitt's being forced out of office only weeks after the Act was passed (Bartlett 264-65). Pitt's name was afterwards associated with the Catholic question (Bartlett 278). *The Novice of Saint Dominick* is set in late sixteenth-century France but deals directly with issues of religious toleration, the monarchy and the state. The suggestion, then, that Pitt had spent his last hours reading Owenson's fiction may well have signalled (or have been read as signalling) a covert pro-Catholic emancipation message which Croker cannot let pass uncontested.

*The Wild Irish Girl* controversy thus took on the tone and became the vehicle for other conflicts. Croker's *Familiar Epistles* had attacked the press as well as the stage: the preface to the first edition complains of "the Dublin Editors" and the difficulty of persuading any Irish newspaper to publish views critical of the patentees of the theatre (Croker, *Familiar Epistles* v-vi). The *Freeman's Journal* in turn censured the *Familiar Epistles*, describing it as "replete with scurrility, obscenity, and falsehood" (Croker, *Familiar Epistles*, 4th ed., xvi). Despite Owenson's narrative of her persecution in the press, then, and in contrast to Mary Campbell's reading of the newspaper as

being won round to Owenson's side, Croker would have expected to find no friends in the *Freeman's* (Campbell 82). A reading of the various contributions shows in fact that Owenson had far more defenders than detractors, and that despite oft-repeated claims to "perfect neutrality" (*Freeman's Journal* 22 January 1807), the *Freeman's* was broadly behind Owenson and her writings. The editor sometimes attacked the quality of the defences written to support her but made much of the contributions of one "J.L.", celebrated as Owenson's worthy champion (*Freeman's Journal* 20, 21, 22 January 1807). In March, the editor admits to having deferred publication of Croker's letter on *The First Attempt*, Owenson's comic opera, "for we were unwilling to give publication to any thing that might be construed unfavourable to Miss Owenson, pending her benefit" (*Freeman's Journal* 13 March 1807).

The previous editor of the *Freeman's* had been Francis Higgins. Known as "the Sham Squire", Higgins was a government informer who had turned the newspaper over to the service of the authorities (Inglis 116). This became common knowledge in Dublin in the aftermath of the 1798 rebellion, for it was Higgins who betrayed the charismatic and popular United Irish leader, Lord Edward Fitzgerald, into government hands. In 1806, the *Freeman's* was under the editorship of Phillip Harvey Whitfield, described by W.J. Fitzpatrick as "an Irishman of liberal opinions" (Fitzpatrick, *Note on the Cornwallis Papers* 94). Whitfield continued to support the government, but "ineffectively and in obscurity", and although he received in turn some government support (Inglis 116), he "gradually restored the paper to its old and popular policy" (Fitzpatrick, *Note on the Cornwallis Papers* 94). Bedford, in an attempt to reform the system of government subsidies for newspapers, set up a paper the Castle might call its own. The *Correspondent* appeared first in November 1806 and, according to Brian Inglis's history of Irish newspapers, "by September 1807 could claim to have the largest circulation of any Dublin newspaper" (Inglis 117). All the more significant then that the *Correspondent*, too, supported Owenson, reporting with delight on March 14, 1807 on the presence of Bedford at a benefit performance of her opera. Thus, endorsing Owenson may have been just one plank in a broader policy pursued by the *Freeman's Journal*, allowing it to curry favour with the Bedford administration and redeem its reputation for patriotism.

*THE WILD IRISH GIRL* media event testifies to both the confusion and the creativity of the years immediately after the Union. In contrast to the well-known and almost instantly clichéd predictions as to the death of Dublin and the decline of civilised society in the deposed capital, there seems instead to have been something of a flurry of self-interest and examination. Christopher Morash concurs with this view, finding that the conventional picture of decaying post-Union Dublin does not do justice to "the liveliness of Irish theatrical life in the early years of the nineteenth century" (Morash). Sydney Owenson and her father were far from the only figures to have responded to John Wilson Croker's *Familiar Epistles* in print. One of the most notorious

of the later publications in this mini-paper war was a savagely satirical and salacious portrait of life in Dublin castle called *Cutchacutchoo, or the Jostling of the Innocents*. (Cutchacutchoo is described as a game played by fashionable women, in which they squat down on their haunches and jump about, jostling, pucking and knocking one another over.) This was attributed to Croker who was forced to appear in print and disown the publication; later pamphlets such as *The History of Cutchacutchoo, Dublin Run Mad!!!* and *The Croaker: and Venus Angry* extended the metaphor of gaming and blind man's bluff into a commentary on anonymous authorship.

Significantly, it is the vigorous and trenchantly critical culture surrounding early nineteenth-century Irish theatre (as much as the plays being performed) which motivates Morash's reappraisal of post-Union Dublin. The introspective interest in definitions of Irishness which both Morash and I discern may well have been provoked by the location of legislative power elsewhere. Rather than just reading this concern as a sign of a nascent cultural nationalism, however, it is worth noticing the primacy of criticism as the privileged mode of expression. Political unease seeks not only a cultural expression, but also a critical vocabulary. Gerry Smyth, in his survey of Irish critical discourse, insists that its beginnings lie in "the First Celtic Revival" and the "critical controversies" of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Ireland. These, he says, show how "a prefiguring critical discourse creates a series of social and institutional spaces in which such a culture and its particular effects can function and have meaning" (Smyth 33). Thus, the exchanges in the *Freeman's* and other newspapers regarding *The Wild Irish Girl* are of interest as part of an emerging culture of criticism. They are significant in that they voice certain demands and expectations regarding the treatment of Ireland in fiction.

In the light of recent discussions of the success or otherwise of Irish attempts at literary realism, it is worth noting how Croker's later and (at least initially) favourable reviews of Maria Edgeworth's Irish fictions single out her "vraisemblance" for special praise, and define by default the literary and political ideal from which Owenson falls away (Croker, Review of *Tales of Fashionable Life*). Paraphrasing the review of Edgeworth's *Tales of Fashionable Life*, Croker's biographer Brightfield comments on how his "critical canons for novels were obviously the laws of probability and the attainment of a happy medium between the extremes of the dullness of too faithful reproduction and of the impossibilities of the usual romance themes" (Brightfield 339). The explicitness of Croker's attack on Owenson enables us to embed such literary judgements in the politics of nineteenth-century Ireland, making visible how aesthetic categories operate along national lines. Rather than asking secondary or subsidiary critical questions, then, calls such as Croker's for alternative literary models were already determining the shapes within which Ireland could be imagined.

The first detailed accusations are extremely attentive to questions of literary style, and from the outset the novel's mode of address is held up to

scrutiny and its use of particular images and discursive constructs criticised. Croker singles out Owenson's use of the trope of the Englishman arriving in Ireland for special censure: already a "hyper readable character" (Warner 252), this figure serves to embody and underline the differences between the neighbouring countries. *The Wild Irish Girl* heightens this effect—as Croker points out—by its use of epistolary narrative. The novel's opening letters are his other chief target.

Both the letters and the character who writes them, an unknown Englishman who goes by the name of Henry Mortimer, sum up for Croker the problem with the narrative treatment of English/Irish difference. Croker is scathingly critical of the ease with which Owenson does away with Mortimer's prejudices:

Ireland more than savage Ireland, affords no semblance of idea, no ground for reflection, all is dull, all is barbarous. Now, Sir, one would hardly think, that this is meant to be one of the cleverest contrasts imaginable,—at Holyhead the Irish (70 miles distant) are "unknown, semi-barbarous, semi-civilised," scarcely has our "honest chronicler" arrived in the bay of Dublin, than he begins to waver in his bad opinion; at the Pigeon house, he is half-naturalized, and no sooner does he set foot on the first flag of our metropolis than he starts into a ready-made true born Irishman. (*Freeman's Journal* 2 January 1807)

Criticism of Owenson is promised and, indeed, discussed and debated weeks before it appears in print, suggesting a circulation of opinion not confined to the pages of the newspaper and thus difficult to access. A glimpse into this process is, however, afforded by Andrew Blair Carmichael's *The Law Scrutiny; or, Attornies Guide*, a satirical account of Dublin's literary and theatrical controversies published early in 1807. In a note, Carmichael remarks on the *Freeman's* controversy in terms typical of many of the contributors, invoking the rules of gendered reading while simultaneously explaining the ways in which *The Wild Irish Girl* media event has caused the unspoken boundaries to be transgressed. Recently, says Carmichael,

I found considerable difficulty to get the *Freeman's Journal* (the paper I usually read) from my wife and daughters, who, while it was filled with election advertisements and French bulletins, surrendered it to my exclusive perusal; let me see, said I, what is this that occupies your attention; and they pointed out a letter signed M.T.—I read it, and then for the first time determined to read the book [the *Wild Irish Girl*] it calumniated. (Carmichael 95-96)

The *Guide* was dedicated to George Ponsonby, Lord Chancellor of Ireland, and the man whose family Croker (correctly) describes as leading Whig politics in Ireland (Croker, *Sketch* 21).

On an impartial perusal of both, I was certain, or nearly so, of one of two things, viz. either that Miss Owenson herself abused the book to expedite the sale, which, however, stood in need of no such artifice, (it has been as rapid as it merited) or, that my Lord C—t—r—h [Castlereagh] and the right Honourable Mr. F—[Foster] employed a hireling scribbler to damn a work, which, notwithstanding all the former did to degrade his country, had the impudence to represent the ANCIENT RESPECTABILITY, CONSEQUENCE, AND SPLENDOR OF THE IRISH NATION, and to throw impediments in the way of the latter, to banish from the land the only faithful animal it seems to contain. (Carmichael 96)

The dedication is signed December 1806 and thus suggests a rapid response to the *Freeman's* letters, further illustrative of the "ambient" and "pervasive" characteristics of *The Wild Irish Girl* phenomenon. The reference to "the only faithful animal" in the land becomes clearer as Carmichael continues:

My first opinion preponderated, till a second or third of these letters, descending to personal invective, completely banished it, and left the last imprested [sic] on my conviction. Had Miss Owenson then the *Canicide* in view when she wrote the twenty-eighth page of her Second Volume? And did she in contemplation say, that the animal he persecuted was just as serviceable to society in his way, as he in his? God knows he is, and a great deal more so.—Ah!!! such a Patriot! (Carmichael 96-97)

Lord Castlereagh was Chief Secretary to the Lord Lieutenant in the immediate post-Union period while John Foster was the controversial Protestant Patriot who led the opposition to the Union on the grounds that it might result in Catholic emancipation. On "the twenty-eighth page of her Second Volume", Owenson's heroine Glorvina meets a young peasant boy named Dermot, who is cruelly abusing a dog. Carmichael here discerns a reference to John Giffard, a protégé of Foster's (and a connection of Croker's by marriage), the author of a virulently anti-Catholic poem called "The Orange". He was widely known in Dublin as "the dog in office". A mock biography of Giffard was entitled *The Life and Surprising Adventures of a Dog*. He was fired from his job by Bedford's predecessor Hardwicke in 1805—presumably the event referred to by Carmichael as "the Canicide"—for inciting sectarian hatred by raising an anti-Catholic petition to send to the King on behalf of Dublin Corporation. Such a reading resonates with Owenson's own fictional method: contemporary debates and discussions are the very stuff of *The Wild Irish Girl*. Carmichael's conjectural interpretation serves to place the fiction in the thick of contemporary politics and secures it in a tightly bound network of connections.

The performance of Owenson's comic opera from March of 1807, mentioned above, was the central episode in the formation of her strategic alliance with Dublin Castle. Her 1846 account of the event is distinctively a product of the literary politics of this later period, and as a result probably distorts its consequence. Despite the anachronistic claims to national significance, however, this self-review still stands as a tantalisingly vivid picture of Dublin on the cusp of cultural nationalism:

The theatre exhibited a singular and brilliant spectacle on this occasion, extremely demonstrative of the party feeling at that time in Ireland, and indeed of its peculiar social state. The vice-regal box and dress circle were exclusively occupied by the court, and officers of the garrison, who were headed by the Commander-in-Chief. The whole of the liberal part of the Irish bar, and their friends, filled the upper circle, and the pit and galleries were occupied by a popular Irish Catholic audience; whose fun and humorous sallies filled up the intervals of the acts, while their frequent cheers for the Lord Lieutenant, and frequent calls for "Patrick's Day" and "Kate Kearney,"—(a popular composition of the author's) produced a sort of *national drama*, "*avant la scene*," infinitely more amusing than that which was enacted on it. The Duchess of Bedford and all the ladies of her circle wore the Irish bodkin, and thus raised the price of Irish gold, in the Dublin market of bijouterie! if not of its native talent! (*The Wild Irish Girl* xxxv)

This latter description of the Duchess of Bedford's bodkin probably refers to the Glorvina ornament—a kind of Celtic brooch—which was produced under the Duchess's patronage. This was very much in line with the Duchess of Bedford's patronage of what was called "the Irish look" in fabric, costume and jewels (*Dublin Evening Post* 7 April 1807).

One of the effects of Owenson's name appearing "in *large Roman Characters*", as one correspondent put it (*Freeman's Journal* 14 January 1807), was that print culture, including both the newspapers in which she was written about and the novels which she had herself authored, came to define and circumscribe her own "character". Owenson was not only the author of *The Wild Irish Girl*: for some selected audiences, she became also the Wild Irish Girl in person, the very embodiment of "the Irish look". Hailed as both "the Irish de Staël" and "the Irish Corinne", Owenson was thought to embody both objective, authorial authority and subjective, personal experience. This publicity trick bears a wider contextual reading, and can be connected to the celebration and commodification of the figure of the woman of genius within European romanticism. Chloe Chard has recently discussed the famous "attitudes" of Emma Hamilton in this light. Living in Naples in the 1780s and 1790s as the wife of the British Envoy and the mistress of Admiral Nelson, the celebrated beauty re-animated poses from classical sculpture for the benefit of British tourists. She thus became herself an object of interest on the Grand Tour (Chard 147). Madame de Staël, with whom Owenson is more frequently compared, styled herself as the heroine of her most famous book, *Corinne; ou L'Italie* (1807) for a painting by Elizabeth Vigée-Lebrun, just as Owenson later appeared "*en princesse*" at the London salon of Lady Cork, "denied the civilised privileges of sofa or chair, which were not in character" (Campbell 87).

De Staël and Owenson shared an interest in the idea of female genius, especially the figure of the *improvvisatrice*, the female improviser of lyric verse: Glorvina is compared to an Italian *improvvisatrice* early in *The Wild Irish Girl*, and *Corinne* opens with its poet-heroine being crowned at the Capitol in Rome. Moreover, the celebration of genius carried a specific resonance in Ireland, legible in the early nineteenth century as part of the iconography of the United Irishmen and thus carrying revolutionary connotations (Thuente 10-11). Evoking an ethereal, feminised quality, and presented as a guiding spirit who might inspire political fervour, the "genius of Ireland" was a familiar feature of United Irish poetry and paintings. Mary Helen Thuente's analysis of the iconography cites a description of Glorvina in *The Wild Irish Girl* (her "genius . . . has ever appeared to me as a light from heaven, an emanation of divine intelligence") as "[t]he trope's most notable nineteenth-century survival" (Thuente 12).

Just such a politicised reading of Owenson's "genius" (and even Croker credits her with a degree of this) is evident in the *Freeman's* correspondence, which repeatedly celebrates this quality as both natural and national. A typical letter (from Lisburn, February 4) claims that "[b]y her glowing pencil our

national character is drawn and displayed in its proper light . . . The performance adds another wreath to her laurels, and entitles her to the gratitude of her country." The *Freeman's* may not have intended an analogy with the Glorvina brooch when it hailed Owenson as "one of the greatest ornaments of our country" (November 1807), yet the elevation of the author herself to the role of touchstone of national taste does effectively objectify her: according to one poem she is both "ERIN'S friend! and ERIN'S glory!" (May 8, 1807). The letter from Lisburn cited above also hails her as "one of the brightest ornaments of our isle".

That this judgement could be cast in a more negative vein is evident in "A Familiar Epistle to Miss Owenson, from an old friend and a new face", which proclaims:

Whether thy writings form the female's mind,  
Or teach Glorvina's pin her locks to bind,  
Thy fertile genius, as by fancy led,  
Improves the brain or decorates the head;  
In books or diamonds equally you shine,  
And rank as high, with Archer as with Vigne.  
Great in the Drama, greater in the Court,  
Invent new Jewels, or new Songs import[.]  
(*Freeman's Journal* 31 March, 1 April 1807)

Owenson here is presented as transgressing the borders of taste. She affronts decorum by joining fiction to fashion and culture to commerce and court politics. Responsible for herself importing "new Jewels" and "new Songs" into Ireland, the threat of Owenson's "fertile genius" emerges as her capacity to trade on her own reputation.

Looking back on "the friends, foes, and adventures of Lady Morgan" a few years after her death, W.J. Fitzpatrick offers this interpretation of Owenson's relationship with her critics:

the lesson which her life teaches is based on the great and significant fact, that with her own fragile female hand she not only parried undauntedly the assaults of a furious and organised host of Critic-Cut-Throats, but absolutely hurled them, one by one, to the ground; and the teeth that had been sharpened to gnaw this brilliant woman's heart, impotently bit the dust beneath her feet . . . The blows aimed at her own fair fame she made recoil upon her assailants. (Fitzpatrick, *Friends, Foes, and Adventures* 136-37)

Here Fitzpatrick faithfully echoes Owenson's own account, offered in her *Letter to the Reviewers of "Italy"*, where she presents herself as an Amazon (a notion she surely borrows from Croker and his earlier *Amazoniad*) defending herself against all attackers:

It is now, I believe, twelve or fourteen years since the supposed literary organ of Government gave the word to all subaltern scribes to bear down and attack whatever I should print . . . They have attacked me in every point where the woman was most susceptible, the author most sensitive. They have attacked my public profession, and private character, my person, my principles, my country, my friends, my kindred, even my dress. (Owenson, *Letter to the Reviewers of "Italy"* 5)

There seems little doubt that Owenson, like Charlotte Smith before her and George Eliot afterwards, sought not just to write but to make a career out of writing. Croker makes it clear early in his crusade against her that it is specifically Owenson's claim to public attention which earns his censure. Criticised for bringing the character of a lady before the public eye, Croker dismisses the special pleading and answers in terms familiar to twentieth-century critical theory:

Is there no such thing Sir, as that species of literary criticism, which abstracts the author from his works, the production from the person? Is all freedom of opinion to give way, because a Lady writes? (*Freeman's Journal* 17 January 1807)

Croker insists that in placing her book upon the public stage, Owenson must be prepared for the criticisms of the audience whose attention she has sought out:

If indeed Sir, Miss Owenson's "Wild Irish Girl," was a novel printed at her own expence, and distributed with gratuitous kindness among her friends, embellished with all the Luxury of Letter Press, and the affluence of Book-binding, I would have been the last to intrude upon the sacredness of private property. I would have read, disliked, and been silent. The reverse is the case: written professedly for the gain of the sale, and ushered confidently to the public; no friendly partiality can dare for a moment, to disallow, the competency of that public to judge. (*Freeman's Journal* 17 January 1807)

Here Croker makes it clear that had Owenson not been in search of commercial gain—as in her countertype, the independently wealthy and ultimately frivolous author evoked in the image of the private printing press—her reputation might have remained her "private property". Once her book is made available "for the gain of the sale", however, Owenson herself becomes a public possession. This precarious dependence on the marketplace is picked up by many of the correspondents. The "Son of Ireland" warned Croker that Owenson made her living from governessing and that his attack could potentially deprive her of this means of employment (*Freeman's Journal* 3 January 1807). "Let Miss Owenson enjoy the rich harvest of her earnings", entreats J.L. on January 21, considering it a matter for national pride "that our country boasts of Women who by genius and merit acquire independencies, and are admitted in the first rank in society". "She is realizing, we hear, a noble independence", commented the *Freeman's Journal* on November 6, 1807, citing her commercial success as a fitting source for national pride.

In his book on "the fame machine", Frank Donoghue argues that a relationship with professional reviewers—even an antagonistic one—helped define authorship as a career in the eighteenth century and set in place the nineteenth- and twentieth-century concept of the professional writer. For eighteenth-century women writers, who were either reviewed according to "sharply different standards" from their male counterparts, or not reviewed at all, this operated as a serious bar to taking up literature as a career: "Chiefly because reviewers did not take their writing seriously, women were denied a means of participating in the dialectic that generated narratives of profes-



sional accomplishment" (Donoghue 160-61). In Donoghue's account, a "career" like Owenson's is something more than "a natural phenomenon": he sees it as "a narrative that cannot be entirely authored by its own subject". A story of professional success has to be "worked out against a variety of powerful and often oppressive institutional constraints" (Donoghue 3-4). In these terms, Owenson's early conflict with Croker along with her later intrepid assaults on the reviewers of *Italy* and *France* are not so much obstacles on the path to fame as constitutive of her writing identity and celebrity.

That Sydney Owenson went on to achieve her professional ambitions and become a woman of letters may be due in part to these early reviews, which forced her to take on a public role and thus a position within what Donoghue calls "the dialectic that generated narratives of professional accomplishment". As her many later battles with reviewers show, Owenson forged her career from combustible materials; anticipating, even soliciting, but never quite satisfying public expectations as to the role of an Irish woman writer, and creating characters (most notably that of Lady Morgan) whose literary and national conduct never failed to excite critical controversy.

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