

Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* was published in 1800 at the moment of political union between Ireland and Great Britain. This short novel was the first of her Irish tales. Set before 1782, a momentous period for the independence of the Dublin parliament, Thady Quirk, a servant in a big house tells us of four generations of the Rackrent family. As the Irish Catholic narrator, he recounts the decline of this Protestant landowning family who stems from Maria Edgeworth's own background. Thady's stories describe how the Irish middle class rose because of mismanagement by the Protestant elite. The novel represents a key moment in the enlargement of the autonomy of women's authorship. Narrated from a colonial point of view, *Castle Rackrent* indicates Edgeworth's hybridity in regard to her "Anglo-Irishness" and heralds the beginnings of a reflection on Irish nationhood and the salient function of women in the story. My analysis will revolve around the ways in which women in *Castle Rackrent* demonstrate ambivalence in terms of their presence as victims and as characters whose socio-political weight indicates their evolution. Emphasis will be laid on how women are regarded as victims of a patriarchal system in which, at the same time, they use as a model to acquire economic independence while the landlords fall from grace and lose their prestige.

To argue that women in the novel are presented as victims is not untrue. Like the relationship between servants and masters, they are oppressed in many ways and this is expressed through Thady's male narrative voice. When one refers to victimhood in *Castle Rackrent*, it has to be understood on several levels.

In the domestic sphere, the notion of personal finance and legitimation in regard to ownership are key issues. For instance, Sir Kit keeps his rich wife cooped up and even tries to steal her money for his private business. The question of property triggers tensions between husbands and wives. If we read Kathryn Kirkpatrick, we understand that "before the Norman invasion of Ireland, Gaelic women had held [...] personal property equally with men in marriage." However, "this egalitarian mode ceased with inheritance." Women's identity is, it seems, predicated on their will to legitimise property and their only chance to inherit the land is to get rid of the patriarch who becomes an obstacle. One cannot discuss women's victimisation without mentioning the male figures who influence their behaviours. Indeed, men's final actions are used to deceive the narrator. In order to avoid being judged harshly, they have to show empathy by doing a number of different actions which are in reality disguised under false apologies. Sir Kit for instance sends a servant to tell his imprisoned wife that the company is drinking her health. Sir Condy gives his wife a memorandum and tells her to 'shew it to [her] friends' (p 70) The reason why he decides to give her the jointure is to avoid being criticised by her friends about his marriage of unshared interests. Also, when Sir Kit fritters away his money in Bath, he intends to use his wife's fortune for his own benefit. His marriage to a wealthy Jewess is a way for him to reclaim his losses. Kirkpatrick suggests that he "resorts to raw domination because exploiting his wife through the marriage contract fails." When Thady learns that his master's bride won't support him financially, he becomes judgemental and sees her as a foreigner, she is therefore excluded from the domestic sphere. Murtagh's wife is not left unscathed neither. Here is Thady's opinion of Lady Murtagh, "I did not like her [...] – she was of the family of the Skinflints, and a widow" (p 12)

Besides, his preference for Judy over Lady Isabella is clearly underlined in these lines: “if she's no Jewish like the last, she is a mad woman for certain, which is as bad” (p 47) Seen in this light, women can represent the prejudged who turn out to be unhappy once they have been married. Lady Isabella feels abandoned when Sir Condy “swallow[ed] the last glass of whiskey punch, [she] burst into tears” (p 49). Thady deplores that Sir Condy, unable to remain wifeless, married her though he “had no liking not he to stage plays, not to Miss Isabella either” (p 43) In that sense, Lady Rackrent is a victim of domesticity and of her husband's inevitable decision to sell the estate. Her unrequited love can be seen as unfair and adds to the realisation that her husband will probably not become a Member of Parliament. It becomes clear then that marital union is endured but does not last. At the end of the novel, “Jason did not marry [...] Judy, as I prophesied, and I am not sorry for it” (p 96) If Ireland is to ‘marry’ England, it might mark the end of its liberty and sovereignty. For the Irish nation, the parliament would be dissolved and for Judy, it could mean dependence on a husband.

In the struggle for property, inequalities appear to be based on gender. However, in the political sphere too, women's access is restricted. In fact, the Penal Laws were an important issue at the time because it forbade Catholics to own land and have access to education or even become Member of Parliament. Thady and Maria Edgeworth share in common a marginal and colonised status in that both receive the same treatment concerning the franchise since both are not allowed to vote. When she wrote the novel in the late 18th century, nationalism began to rise and united people around the same goal: a democratic and independent Ireland. In that sense, Edgeworth invites us to reflect on the future status of Ireland as well as that of women and Catholics which seem to be endangered and frail. Indeed, uncertainty permeates the novel. As Declan Kiberd notes, “A true Union with Britain may herald not the extinction of the Rackrents but of the Irish race itself.” Ireland, last to integrate the UK may have seen Scotland as a model for the transformation from colonised to equal citizen of a larger society. As Thady signals, Sir Murtagh’s wife is Scottish, she has “Scotch blood in her veins” (p 68) Seen in this light, she can potentially represent incorporation into a community which assimilates the subaltern and gives birth to a British character. The fear that the Irish character would disintegrate and make room for a superficial identity is expressed in the Preface when Maria Edgeworth announces “When Ireland loses her identity by a union with Great Britain” (p 5) Another allusion to Scotland is when Sir Condy goes there to marry without authorization, imperiling paternal ties and inheritance laws.

As far as religion is concerned, women can relate to Catholics regarding the flouting of their rights. The representation of the subaltern is significant in that both women and Catholics struggle to assert or rather re-assert their identities. Jews and Catholics went through similar socio-political difficulties. Certainly, the relationship between Thady and the Jewish foreigner is a clear indicator that outsiders, regardless of their gender, embody the figure of the Other. Since one is a Christian and the other a “Blackamoor”, they are parasites in the eyes of Protestants. Their religions are deemed inferior in that they threaten the imperial blueprint. Eve Eisenberg asserts that their relationship represents “the potential for Ireland not to recognise how it is perceived by England.”

Thady sides with his master and does not acknowledge the Jewish bride as an equal member of the Rackrent family. Many critics argue that women are allegories for the relationship between Ireland and England. In a patriarchal system, it is true that the colonised is in a position of weakness as he is dispossessed. Yet, the female figure cannot be said to be weak. When Sir Kit's wife refuses to give him her diamond cross, the impression which is left is that she resists in the same manner that Ireland resists England and she is condemned because of this resistance. Ireland, too, is trapped and seems unable to escape her political union with an unwanted parliament. So, one way of reading the confinement episode is that women may be used allegorically to stand for the cruelty and unfairness of England against the Irish. Even though Lady Kit is an heiress, she is a Jew and her liminal figure epitomises the warnings to England and Ireland in the prospect of being united. According to Eve Eisenberg, "Marriage serves as juxtaposition for the purpose of contrast." She contends that "For the English, the existential question of Union has to do with what becomes of Englishness should Great Britain continue to annex, to absorb." To her, the symbol of the cross is of note because it is "carried by a heathen individual". Indeed, Thady notes that 'she could not abide pork or sausages, and went neither to church nor mass.' (p 27) Eisenberg explains that Jews "embody fears associated with rapid cultural and political change." Sir Kit could represent England, he cites Shakespeare by calling his wife 'my pretty Jessica' (31) What she wants is to conserve her language, foodways and wealth. In this sense, an unaltered post-Union Ireland is conceivable. Declan Kiberd suggests that she sees Ireland as "an inadequate version of the England from which she has been snatched." It is a sign that what is effective in England might not be in Ireland and the Penal Laws have proved this. At the time, it was also believed the Penal Laws would come to an end with the Union.

Castle Rackrent is also about class conflicts and cultural differences. Edgeworth, as Declan Kiberd puts it "effectively crossed class and cultural divisions too." This means that she doesn't stick to a specific framework about a traditional socio-cultural status. In addition, Nicholas Mason suggests that far from focusing on gender issues exclusively, her adaptation of home life comprises issues of class: "the domesticity Edgeworth advocates is a summons for all members of polite society, whether female or male, to live up to their gender- and class-based responsibilities." Lady Kit's ignorance about the Irish country and culture can account for her victimisation. Thady who witnesses her inexperience in Ireland anticipates her confinement, "I saw she was going the way to make his honor mad with her" (p 27) In these lines, one understands her role as a victim in terms of cultural disconnection. Eisenberg maintains that her imprisonment may stand for the "isolation of Ireland, its wealth stripped for the benefit of the dominant nation, or it might suppose a caricature of the avaricious Irish villain" In other words, the Jewish character synthesises Maria Edgeworth's scepticism about the economic disadvantage of an imposed integration.

Now it would be wrong to assert that the author exclusively satirises men because women are also to blame. The next part of my analysis will be dedicated to women's failure to notice their involvement in a patriarchal system which subjugates them. Emphasis will be laid on how their socio-political evolution reveals a shift from victimhood to empowerment.

In the first part, I tried to demonstrate that the feminine figures were sufferers in both the public and private sphere, yet their assertive voice cannot be neglected. So, are they using their victimisation so as to pass unnoticed in the male world and take over from it or is their status of innocent victims justified? In other words, are they mere martyrs or are they manipulators?

It cannot be denied, women grow more and more powerful in the subsequent financial distress of their husbands. Male failures regarding the estate management are women's opportunities. According to Jennifer M. Van Vliet, "Although marriage plots do have nationalistic and socio-political connotations in Edgeworth's Irish tales, most of the didactic material is grounded in the land itself." Indeed, the wives' decision to leave their companion wifeless, childless and alone with no land of their own – preferring a life elsewhere in England like Lady Kit or with their family and friends like Lady Isabella – is a harbinger of the end of male dominance over domesticity and ownership. Sir Condly's wife is influenced by her friends in her resolution to leave, as evidenced by the letter she hides from him. Her departure expresses "the wishes of all [her] friends" (p 67) Kathryn Kirkpatrick notes that, "the distracted heirs of Castle Rackrent leave their property open to challenges from the family's women". The last male heirs of Castle Rackrent drink too much to be representative and consistent in their role as owner and leader. Indeed, they no longer live up to the society's expectations. In this sense, they are deprived of their paternal authority since they are not apt to rule a family. Women take advantage of this situation to prosper. As Kirkpatrick remarks, "the Rackrent women test the limits of both customary practice and laissez-faire relations by vying with men for property." Having no children, unlike Thady, and running out of money, the Rackrent men certainly come across as powerless in the eyes of women. Moreover, they are virtual Protestants and even "usurpers" in Declan Kiberd's view since they had to convert to be able to own the estate. So, their credibility as patriarch is undermined from the start.

As Kathryn Kirkpatrick notices, "Edgeworth [...] ridicules the excesses of individualism in both sexes." If on one hand, men are refused necessary money to redress their economic situation, on the other hand, the feminine figures through Thady's subjective vision, are venal characters whose economic interests are paramount over their love affairs. For example, the last Lady Rackrent in the novel complains about her husband's financial collapse and dishonesty: 'did you not use me basely, Sir Condly, (says she) not to tell me you were ruined before I married you?' (p 66) In the same way, Judy refuses to be Sir Condly's wife as she realises he is penniless. When Sir Condly asks her to be his lady Rackrent, she answers: 'why what signifies it to be my lady Rackrent and no Castle?' (p 92) Women's individualism, avarice and ingratitude do not avoid Thady's critical eye. The servant blames Judy for not becoming his master's wife: "hear the pride and ingratitude of her, and he giving his last guineas [...] to her childer" (p 92). Judy's realisation of her unfair treatment marks the beginning of a reaction followed by a crucial and definitive action; a hint that Ireland as well as women is not passive as the coloniser would believe.

Marilyn Butler in *Castle Rackrent and Ennui* intimates that "old aristocratic stories of male dominance and legitimacy are being challenged by democratized women-centered plots of family life in which servants, including female servants, wield power [...]" Women can be said to be manly in the novel because they are exploitive like their husbands and even more.

Thady describes how Sir Kit tried to get the diamond cross from her wife while she was ill "but she was there too tough for him" (p 31) Even when in poor health, she does not give up. As Marilyn Butler's on the manliness of women tells us, these "individualized women [...] are unusually energetic and articulate." She adds that "the Edgeworth heroine has always been thought of as notably well-educated, that is less feminine than other writers' heroine." (*Castle Rackrent and Ennui*) After these observations, it can be said that women are regarded as individualists who are careful with their money and this is true especially for Lady Murtagh and Lady Kit. The first of them is a "great economist" (p 17) Indeed, she exploits the tenants and eventually "emerges victorious in the conflict and leaves the estate financially secure." Unlike the landlord, her avaricious nature does not prevent her from being successful, rather she "crosses gender boundaries and adopts the laissez-faire competitive behavior usually reserved for men under rule of law." In contrast to Sir Condy's lack of ambition, Lady Isabella "made the barrack-room into a theatre" (p 49) while Lady Kit intends to "spend the rest of her days upon her own income and jewels in England" (p 35) Here, one can assume that women's apparent selfishness and desire for space and creativity is in fact caused by men's oppressive influence. Edgeworth seems to be preoccupied with personal feelings. The reader may notice that once the landlords' debts and failures are made known publicly, there is a possibility for powerful action performed by their independent wives.

Women and the narrator seem to be observants but also dynamic actors in the demise of Castle Rackrent's landlords. What they really observe is the abuses of rack-renting and absenteeism which highlight the poor individual performance and absence from the duties on the part of the Rackrents. The anecdote of Sir Kit's death in a duel stands in contrast to Sir Condy's wife who escapes a serious accident. In fact, what is striking is that women remain alive and at the same time appear to be impervious to their husband's economic and physical death. Thady is surprised to see Judy so insensitive to Sir Condy's physical and emotional state: 'Judy! Judy! have ye not touch of feeling? won't you stay to help us nurse him?' (p 95) This is not surprising in reality because Judy had been spurned by Sir Condy. Thady and his sister are the only individuals who stay near him at his death. Male death is not seen as a trauma, rather, it is experienced as a relief: 'She got surprisingly well after my master's decease.' (p 35) Women's departure seems to mirror men's death in terms of the liberation it provides. Moreover, the responsibility of women in the death of their husbands is a significant element in the novel. Thady lays the blame on the Jewish woman for Sir Kit's death. Here is his conclusion: "if it had not been all along with her, his honor Sir Kit would have been now alive" (p 36) Women are the designated culprits when it comes to land disputes as well: "in a dispute of abatement, my lady would have the last word, and Sir Murtagh grew mad" (p18) and died accordingly.

Kathryn Kirkpatrick states that “these women achieve independence precisely by resisting absorption into the Protestant land takeover in Ireland.” When Sir Condry decides to give his wife the jointure Thady is “vexed to see my Lady Rackrent so insensitive” (p 67). After the mock wake Sir Rackrent finds Judy in the kitchen. Even though she doesn't participate in his false funeral, she intensifies his sufferings by ignoring him. The wrong predictions about death seem to express hope for the future of women's condition - their health and wealth. For instance, here is what is said of Lady Kit: 'it was given out she was dead, by mistake' (p32) It indicates a form of regeneration. As the death of Sir Condry's wife is not validated, power is still potentially in her hands. The jointure is to go to her and indeed if we believe Thady, 'my lady Rackrent did not die as was expected of her' (p 96) It may imply that Ireland after the union will suffer but it will survive.

The role of women as messengers of the impending end can be argued. Indeed, Sir Murtagh's death is announced by the Banshee as Thady recounts: 'I warned him that I heard the very Banshee* [...] under Sir Patrick's window.'” Despite the warning, Sir Murtagh fails to anticipate such a fatal end, so the Banshee appears as a messenger of bad omen for the Protestant class and as a feminine force, destructive and detrimental to the landlords' possessions and inheritance. As for Mrs Jane, she predicts a difficult relationship: 'as Miss Isabella's maid reported, her young mistress was fallen over head and ears in love with Sir Condry' (p 43) She gives Thady the details of the relationship crisis between the married couple. Although she is a maid who is alluded to only a few times in the novel, her presence at important moments makes her the witness of a gradual degradation in the marital relationship. She is the one who leaves the castle with Lady Rackrent in the jaunting car to Mount Juliet Town. Her loyalty to the feminine figure contrasts Thady's alleged loyalty to his master. Another telling example is when Judy announces Lady Rackrent's lethal state: 'Has he heard the news? [...] my lady Rackrent that was is kilt and lying for dead,' (p 84) During Sir Condry's false wake, Thady introduces his sister whose name is not mentioned. Her role is to take care of the last heir: 'I got my shister, who was an old woman very handy about the sick [...] to come up to the Lodge to nurse him' (p 82) but she cannot mend the damage made to the Anglo-Irish generation.

Thady, the mediator between the male and female worlds, is also a manipulative character who can relate to women. He and his sister seem to have the same way of thinking regarding the next woman who should be part of the Rackrent family and replace the wife who left the castle: 'we settled it that Judy was very like to be my lady Rackrent after all' (p 87) His sister is a witness as himself of the demise of Sir Condry who is now rejected by Judy, a reversal in the story. While Sir Condry realises how much Judy has changed, 'it was hard for Condry himself to know her again' (p 83) she tells him 'it's my lady Rackrent you ought to be thinking of.' (p 86) Here, a decisive shift has occurred since Sir Condry is regretful of his marriage with Lady Isabella.

The toss-up proved to be ludicrous. Men's indecision and hesitation counter women's confidence and poise. The figure of the woman is independent economically and not complimentary, she does not need a man who is now poor as she used to be. She has grown from submissive to confident. Her leaving adds to other women's departure, a symbol of radical change and feminine assertion. One can finally argue that the empowerment of women is a response to men's failed domination and although women are contending for power, the last struggle between Lady Rackrent and Jason over the estate ownership at the end of the novel implies that this power is likely to fail to achieve complete success in the same manner the 1798 rebellion by the United Irishmen was crushed.

One can conclude by asserting that women are victimised characters who can nevertheless symbolise emancipation in *Castle Rackrent*. Politics and marriage are linked to satirise men's institutions and their material greed which reflect their hold on their spouse. Besides, religion tensions shed light on a rupture of identity. In colonial works, the loss of cultural identity is a big issue. Women's condition is similar to that of Catholics - they can't vote, they can't own land, and this is challenged in the novel. If the union is to happen then it is a forced one precisely because women as well as Ireland are rebellious entities, which renders the idea of union itself unstable and unbearable. Through her representation of women, Maria Edgeworth seems to be pessimistic about a successful incorporation because different cultures and social classes have emerged after the plantations. She offers us a reflection on how the idea of nationhood can be undermined by the land conflicts between Catholics and Protestants. A century after Scotland joined the UK, Ireland was about to follow the same destiny and women embody those tensions between dependence and independence, assimilation and liberation. A union of equals might work, it seems, only if men accept to integrate women into their system without altering their cultural identities and traditions. The feminine figures testify of these ongoing socio-political changes. Far from being fragile, they are fairly strong and wild and this is evidenced by their observation of the downfall of the gentry, so one can draw conclusions as to whether or not their conditions have been or will be improved. On a number of points, women and men are similar creatures since they use the land for their economic interests. However, these are the female characters, especially the wives, who seem to be the winners. Their departure and isolation predict a future lying in the nationalist struggle in which they wish to keep their money for themselves. The British Empire managed by men and desiring to remain unchanged might face an Ireland reluctant to be civilised and give its money. Finally, it can be said that Edgeworth's work highlights her own background with women's involvement in agricultural improvement, economics and politics. What is certain is that Literature through this progressive novel gives a voice to women.

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