
“Cannot an Irishman be a good man?”: Maria Edgeworth’s “The Limerick Gloves” (1804) as a Tale of Irish Identity

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Abstract. This paper explores the representation of the Irishman in Maria Edgeworth’s “The Limerick Gloves” (*Popular Tales* 1804). By using Homi K. Bhabha’s theory, I argue that in this tale, sexual and colonial oppression are coupled together. Edgeworth questions racial stereotypes, and more specifically the idea of “Irishness” as opposed to Englishness. The use of irony and the narrator’s desire to introduce Ireland to the English reader are in consonance with Edgeworth’s enlightened philosophy and both reveal her rejection of sectarianism. “The Limerick Gloves” also shows Edgeworth’s early reliance on the Union and is particularly interesting since it was relatively free from Richard Lovell Edgeworth’s tutelage.

Key Words. Anglo-Irish literature, Maria Edgeworth, Irishness, Nineteenth-Century Literature, Stereotypes.

Resumen. En este artículo se examina la representación de los irlandeses en el relato “The Limerick Gloves” de Maria Edgeworth. Partiendo de las tesis de Homi K. Bhabha, consiero que en este relato la opresión sexual y colonial están íntimamente unidas. Edgeworth pone en entredicho estereotipos raciales, y más concretamente, la idea de “lo irlandés” en oposición al concepto de “lo inglés”. El uso de la ironía y el deseo del narrador de acercar Irlanda a los lectores ingleses están en consonancia con la filosofía ilustrada de Edgeworth y en ambos casos se demuestra su rechazo al sectarianismo. En “The Limerick Gloves” también se muestra el apoyo inicial de Edgeworth a la unión con Gran Bretaña y esto especialmente revelador puesto que demuestra estar en gran medida libre de la influencia de Richard Lovell Edgeworth.

Palabras clave. Literatura angloirlandesa, Maria Edgeworth, lo irlandés, literatura del siglo XIX, estereotipos.

1. Introduction.¹

In his illuminating book *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha develops his ideas on mimicry as one of the most effective strategies of colonial power. For this scholar, mimicry occurs when a colonized society imitates its colonizer to the point of near indistinguishability. The result is ambivalence or hybridity which Bhabha contemplates as a liminal space in which cultural differences articulate and actually produce imagined “constructions” of cultural and national identity. However; in mimicking, the colonized or the Other – who becomes “almost the same” as the colonizer, but never “quite” fits in with the political systems that govern both of them – is assimilated to the colonizer, and never achieves complete synchronization with the imperial culture. The Other is left, instead, in a position of self-doubt. Mimicking the colonizer turns into an elusive strategy; it is a threat and, at the same time, a menace to the colonial structure. The Other stands for a colonial discourse which aims to offer an image of the native populations that does not correspond with their own reality “in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction” (Bhabha 70). The act of copying the colonizing culture represents a challenge to normalized knowledges and disciplinary powers. Additionally, mimicry contains a certain menace in its resemblance; the colonial subject is just a partial presence that marks the concept of the ambivalent: “The success of the colonial appropriation depends on a proliferation of inappropriate objects that ensure its strategic failure” (86).

In this context, the postcolonialist researcher also pays attention to doubling, repetition and metonymic figures because the latter simultaneously mark presence through absence (Bhabha 53). The Other becomes the best metonymy of presence, a strategy “of desire in discourse that make[s] the anomalous representation of the colonized something other than a process of the return of the repressed” (89-90). Bhabha then relates metonymy to mimicry when he discusses the concept of colonial imitation because mimicry “differs from or defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically” (90). While identity normally operates in terms of metaphor, in mimicry, it operates through metonymy substituting wholes for parts, but, again, it never achieves full presence.

Bhabha’s theory applies to Edgeworth’s tale “The Limerick Gloves” because in it an Irishman marked as the Other is anglicized, but also marked as different from the English subject in a profound and disturbing process that mocks authority and has a long tradition which has been traced to the representation of the Irishman on stage. Thus, Josep Leerssen argues that the ethnic vilification of the Irish was reflected in the works of Edmund Spenser and other writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when the military and cultural confrontation between the two countries was at its most acute and the Irish society was seen as uncivilized. Leerssen’s main thesis also suggests that the concept of Irishness was an invention of the English and is not far from Bhabha’s theory: “the polarity in the imago-typical relationship between the two countries is exactly the same on both sides of the divide; the imago-typical binaries are each other's mirror image” (Leerssen 289).

“The Limerick Gloves” is concerned with the representation and the religious and economic dimension of the racial Other as Irish at the same time that Edgeworth insists on the need to correct distorted images of Ireland. O’Neill represents Irishness, but he is assimilated to the colonial English culture. Also, he is associated with a stereotype, which is a major discursive strategy and a way of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is already known and something that must be anxiously repeated. According to Bhabha, this ambivalence ensures the repeatability of the stereotype “in changing historical and discursive conjectures; informs its strategies of individuation and marginalization” (66). In fact, Luke Gibbons explains that for English readers exoticism began at home: “colonization and the animus against Catholicism were inherently bound up with the subjugation of the Celtic

periphery” (11) and that both Ireland and the Scottish Highlands were seen as “the last outpost of savagery and superstition, which lent themselves to some of the earliest forays into the Gothic” (19).

Though “The Limerick Gloves” is not set in Ireland, this country flickers in and out the narrative, emitting a palpable anxiety around potential Irish turmoil. The Edgeworths experienced at first hand the 1798 Rising and were very critical of the political situation in Ireland. It is possible to read the tale at a political level in light of the historical context and colonial status of Ireland at that time as Edgeworth scholar Mitzi Myers and other researchers have done (see also Siobhán Marie Kilfeather and Willa Murphy). “The Limerick Gloves” reflects Edgeworth’s unionist anxieties at the turn of the century and is related to the family’s ultimate idea of the British Empire as an inclusive whole. The key element to achieve such a goal is the narrator’s attitude throughout the tale since “The Limerick Gloves” is marked by a particular didactic tone that renders the story too interesting and subversive as not to be ignored in an analysis of Irish identity. In this article I combine Bhabha’s post-structuralist and psychoanalytical theory with the work of Edgeworth scholars to maintain that “The Limerick Gloves” is a test of Irish phobia and a critique of Englishness since the Irishman conflates the repressed, as well as the modern subject, with the racialized Other.

2. Loving an Irishman.

“The Limerick Gloves” (1804) hinges on the relationship between Phoebe Hill, the daughter of Mr. Hill, a tanner and verger from Hereford; and her lover Brian O’Neill, an Irishman who sends her a pair of Limerick gloves as a present. Mr. Hill is biased against the Irish and forbids his daughter from having any relationship with the Irishman, which Phoebe cannot understand. In the course of the narrative, O’Neill’s good actions prove that he is a good man, but he is sent to jail due to past debts and is even accused of plotting to blow up the cathedral. Eventually, the truth comes to light and O’Neill is set free as Mr. Hill overcomes his prejudices and consents to Phoebe and O’Neill’s union.

In “The Limerick Gloves” Irishness is built on a series of popular myths about Ireland with the image of the Irishman as the main one through the use of metonymy (the substitution of an attribute for the thing meant). By quoting the philosopher Jacques Derrida, Bhabha explains that, through the rhetoric of doubling and repetition, metonymy represents and makes an image “by the anterior default of a presence” and that as a substitute it produces no relief: “its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness” (53). Thus, Ireland is always in the mind of both the characters and the readers and Brian O’Neill stands in for Irishness as opposed to Englishness at the same time that Edgeworth dismantles some popular images of the Irish as drunkards and boors. Since O’Neill has no English roots, he immediately represents the uncanny, and a stranger who becomes evil. Butler’s remark that the Anglo-Irish author evolves the stereotype of the Irish character “fallible, but loyal and warm-hearted” does not apply here since the contrast between the Irishmen who appear incidentally in tales and novels set in England – like “The Limerick Gloves” and more varied high-life Irish characters that Butler points out (363-364) – is simply in consonance with the length and complexity of narratives and will be better appreciated in Irish novels, like *Ennui* (1809) or *The Absentee* (1812). Eighteenth-century English audiences were familiar with the stage Irishman and Teague since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Jeffery 27-30) and the image of the Irishman as Paddy opposing the Englishman as John Bull coexisted with the idea that Irish people were lawless, unstable, emotional, childlike, superstitious, lazy, clannish, backward, Catholic and hard-fighting peasants. In “The Limerick Gloves” many of these features are evoked, but the one that comes to the fore is the belief that the Irish are violent.

Edgeworth portrays the Hills as the forces of oppression against O'Neill; they engender his tragedy, but also the tragedy of someone else since the domestic and the public sphere meet and colonial oppression parallels sexual oppression. In Cliona O'Gallchoir's analysis of Edgeworth's novels, she argues that Edgeworth was inspired by the discourses of the Enlightenment and she relates the public and the private sphere. In "The Limerick Gloves" both spheres meet and women are featured as more perceptive than men. Curiously, shortly before knowing the origin of the gloves, Mrs. Hill praises their quality in a dramatic dialogue. It is she who makes Mr. Hill realize that Phoebe is wearing Irish gloves and she immediately connects them to a plot against the cathedral. Mrs. Hill's assertions and her authority in the tale are simply based on her capacity to draw an analogy – she had discovered that their dog was gone –, but her fiction about O'Neill is strong enough to influence her husband, who immediately decides that Phoebe has to take off the gloves. Mr. Hill victimizes her daughter on O'Neill's account: "He's an Irishman, and that's enough, and too much for me" (Edgeworth, *Popular* 247). Surprisingly, the gloves are replaced by some big mittens which are totally inappropriate at church. Opposing patriarchal decision, Phoebe – whose name suitably evokes phobia – cannot accept discrimination; she questions irrational repression and her query "Cannot an Irishman be a good man?" (Edgeworth, *Popular* 248) is never answered.

The problem with O'Neill is the disproportion between his actions and what is thought about him. For Bhabha, the colonial relationship is structured, on the side of the colonizer and the colonized, by forms of multiple and contradictory beliefs and the stereotype is never stable, but a distortion that is functionally linked to fetishism (70). It is here that Edgeworth's empiricist vein shows since O'Neill's worth is affirmed all the time though his value as a fetish changes. O'Neill's Romantic mythical aura is most appreciated by Phoebe: "the courage and humanity he shewed [sic], in exerting himself to save this unfortunate woman and her children, justified her notion of the possibility that an Irishman might be a good man" (Edgeworth, *Popular* 250). The Irishman is not only committed to improving the lives of those around him but he also assumes his testing. For him, combating prejudice is a way to prove his worth at the same time that he deconstructs another myth on Irishmen associated to women's patrimony:

... the more contrary they are the more pride and joy it would give me to win and wear you, in spite of 'em all and, if without a farthing in your pocket, so much the more I should rejoice in the opportunity of proving to your dear self, and all else whom it may consarn [sic], that Brian O'Neill is no Irish fortune-hunter, and scorns them that are so narrow minded as to think that no other kind of cattle but them there fortune-hunters can come out of all Ireland. (Edgeworth, *Popular* 253)

Edgeworth's hero imperfectly sticks to some images of the Irish. Unlike Phelim in "The Irish Incognito" (*Essay on Irish Bulls* 1801), O'Neill is neither spiritless nor passive; he represents the Irish perfect pride and perfect contempt for the English nation that has long been rooted in literature (Hayton 14), so he protests against his arrest by using a revealing expression. According to O'Neill, an individual is not the representative of a nation and his arrest is unfair: "No, I am not the king's prisoner! I am the prisoner of that shabby rascally tanner, Jonathan Hill. None but he would arrest a gentleman, in this way, for a trifle not worth mentioning" (Edgeworth, *Popular* 270). In this regard, Seamus Deane maintains that Edgeworth "was the first novelist to find an effective means of representing in fiction the subjugation of the individual to social forces" (91). Sentimentalism colours the narrative at this point: Phoebe's love grows when a little girl comes to tell her that O'Neill has been good to a poor Irish haymaker. The battle between her daughterly duty and love is represented by her spreading some leaves of a rose on the gloves and keeping them until the end of the story. Renouncing

the gloves – now Phoebe’s fetish standing in for O’Neill – also means renouncing a part of herself.

Beckett points out that in the eighteenth century an Irish writer had a wider readership outside Ireland and that nobody wrote about Irish life until the middle classes grew in importance and developed a nationalist consciousness. The Catholic middle class then turned into a menace for the “Ascendancy” (Beckett 102-3, 106). In this sense Edgeworth was a pioneer in offering pictures of Ireland, which remained an unknown Other for many Britons, as King George III admitted “We hear from very good authority that the king was much pleased with *Castle Rackrent* – he rubbed his hands and said, “‘What what – I Know something now of my Irish subjects’” (qtd. in Cronin 25). However, Edgeworth’s desire was far from depicting Ireland as something unique, but rather, she aimed to show it as a place similar to England, and she addressed the Anglo-Irish, not the majority of the Irish population:

what she asks for – greater toleration, a greater sense of commitment to the country – requires a change of heart in individuals rather than a change of national status for Ireland ... Maria’s sober efforts to reveal Protestant abuses of power, and to urge England to govern better, showed more political insight than anything else written in fiction in her generation except the novels of Scott. (Butler 391-393)

By the time that Edgeworth wrote “The Limerick Gloves”, the Irish were not only othered by their customs, but also by their language. Conscious of the difference between British and Irish English, the narrative voice is intent on decoding Irishness for the English audience. The linguistic misunderstanding between O’Neill and Phoebe occurs when the former says “I expect she’ll show her generosity and proper spirit by putting them on immediately” (Edgeworth, *Popular* 253) and offends Phoebe. Assuming the stance of the Anglo-Irish colonizer, the narrator supports the hero:

Now Miss Hill, unfortunately, was not sufficiently acquainted with the Irish idiom to know that to expect, in Ireland, is the same thing as to hope in England; and, when her Irish admirer said I expect, he meant only in plain English I hope. But thus it is that a poor Irishman, often, for want of understanding the niceties of the English language, says the rudest when he means to say the civilest things imaginable. (Edgeworth, *Popular* 254)

In “Angelina”, another tale in the same collection, linguistic polyphony provokes comic misunderstanding, but here it precipitates the break-up of lovers. O’Neill and Phoebe’s reluctance to give up their pride means the incapacity for Irishness and Englishness to be together, which is condemned by Edgeworth. O’Neill thinks Phoebe will change her mind like a weathercock, a not very positive image of the English. A similar situation appears when O’Neill’s language shocks the clerk who comes to demand payment of a debt. The narrator explains about transactions in Ireland:

...we cannot wonder that it should seem to him, as he said to his master, more the language of a madman than a man of business. This want of punctuality in money transactions, and this mode of treating contracts as matters of favour and affection, might not have damned the fame of our hero in his own country, where such conduct is, alas! too common but he was now in a kingdom where the manners and customs are so directly opposite that he could meet with no allowance for his national faults. It would be well’ for his countrymen if they were made, even by a few mortifications,

somewhat sensible of this important difference in the habits of Irish and English traders, before they come to settle in England. (Edgeworth, *Popular* 269-270)

Rather than the lack of education, it is the lack of contact between the two countries that is behind these misunderstandings, both when Paddy destroys Mr. Hill's rick of bark ("There is a strange mixture of virtue and vice in the minds of the lower class of Irish: or rather a strange confusion in their ideas of right and wrong, from want of proper education" [*Popular* 285]) – which also points directly to Mr. Hill's ignorance –, and when Paddy reveals more truth than the conjuror. His story makes Mr. Marshal and Mr. Hill laugh, and the narrator takes the reins again: "This story was related in tones, and with gestures, which were so new and strange, to English ears and eyes, that even the solemnity of our churchwarden gave way to laughter. (Edgeworth, *Popular* 296-7)

3. The English insanity

Bhabha's theory is significant in "The Limerick Gloves" in two ways. First, Mr. Hill clearly embodies colonial discourse, which is "crucial to the binding of a range of differences and discriminations that informs the discursive and political practices of racial and cultural hierarchization" (Bhabha 67). By instantiating notions of racial purity, this discourse aims at fixity in order to control the colonized and it also evokes degeneracy, so Mr. Hill anxiously sees the Irish fetish O'Neill as a threat to his narcissistic universe. Secondly, according to Bhabha, the fetish is precisely based on the simultaneous recognition of difference and its disavowal. In fact, fetishism consists in repeating and reactivating a primal fantasy: the subject's desire for a pure origin that is always threatened by its division (107). O'Neill certainly threatens the division of the community and England in many ways. Like Ireland herself, O'Neill represents, for many, an uncomfortable challenge that has to be skipped.

The value of the fetish depends on appearances and there are two conversions in the story corresponding to Mrs. Hill's and Mr. Hill's respectively. O'Neill is revalued and his economic possibilities are highlighted when the O'Neills send Limerick gloves as invitations to their splendid ball. Mrs. Hill does change her mind regarding O'Neill when Jenny Brown appears as Phoebe's rival as she is "a good deal piqued and alarmed by the idea that the perfumer's daughter might rival and outshine her own" (Edgeworth, *Popular* 259). Edgeworth's characteristic irony is revealed and applied to people's opinion, so just after a focalization from Mrs. Hill considering O'Neill as Phoebe's suitor, the narrator uses this metaphor:

... the value of that admirer suddenly rose in her estimation. Thus, at an auction, if a lot is going to be knocked down to a lady, who is the only person that has bid for it, even she feels discontented, and despises that which nobody covets: but if, as the hammer is falling, many voices answer to the question. Who bids more? then her anxiety to secure the prize suddenly rises; and, rather than be outbid, she will give far beyond its value. (Edgeworth, *Popular* 260)

However, Phoebe returns a note from O'Neill that she has received in the morning and risks losing her admirer. Indirectly, Edgeworth suggests the possibility that, in the middle of political confrontation, Ireland chooses a partner other than England. Mrs. Hill's conversion just reveals her hypocrisy, as his husband's later in the narrative. One of the merits of tale is Edgeworth's portrait of human weaknesses and Mrs. Hill is really as weak as her husband, who sometimes cannot understand her. Edgeworth shows the world of provincial England: the inhabitants of Hereford, their beliefs and customs, are paramount. Characters are obsessed by appearances, so

Mr. Hill thinks “It is more fitting that we should be in proper time in our pew, to set an example, as becomes us, than to stand here talking of gloves and nonsense” (Edgeworth, *Popular* 244). The narrator criticizes Mr. Hill’s behaviour and credulity: “How Mr. Hill made the discovery of this debt to the grocer agree with his former notion, that the Irish glover had always money at command, we cannot well conceive; but anger and prejudice will swallow down the grossest contradictions without difficulty” (Edgeworth, *Popular* 263). His wife is very proud and self-assured too, as the narrator points out “she was really inclined to be good-natured, provided people would allow that she had more penetration than any one else in Hereford” (Edgeworth, *Popular* 259).

Ironically although for the English people O’Neill is a stranger coming from a country associated with rebellion, he remains quite passive in the text. It is others who imagine his movements because colonial discourse includes the aggressive identification available to the Imaginary (Bhabha 110). Julia M. Wright interestingly reads “The Limerick Gloves” as a detective fiction in which Edgeworth stresses the dangers of excessive loyalty and its extension in national prejudice. The Irish appear as a threat to the English civil order and O’Neill is featured as a terrorist threatening the peace and order of the English countryside, but the origin of tension lies in England. For Wright, Mr. Marshal educates O’Neill in the correct behaviour for a capitalist economy which transforms Edgeworth’s rewriting of terrorism into cultural and national forms rather than religious (135-136). In my view, in “The Limerick Gloves” religious prejudice meets the economic one and creates a class conflict. First, because O’Neill is a Roman Catholic; secondly, because he could be a fortune-hunter, so English wealth would be in danger; thirdly, because he lives like a gentleman. As Alvin Jackson points out, the growth of the linen industry in south Ulster in the 1800s facilitated some Catholic economic mobility and many young men could establish their independence much earlier than usual. As a consequence, religious rivalries enflamed and commercialization was also linked to socialization (Jackson 75). Mr. Hill is fixed in his prejudice against the Irish. At the pub, he relates O’Neill to the hole under the foundation of the Cathedral, and he supposes that O’Neill is a wicked Roman Catholic who should be watched: O’Neill “had come to settle at Hereford nobody knew why, and...seemed to have money at command nobody knew how” (Edgeworth, *Popular* 263). The ball could be the perfect excuse to “perpetrate his evil design when it is least suspected” (Edgeworth, *Popular* 263).

O’Neil’s presumable involvement in a plot against the inhabitants of Hereford helps to show Mr. Hill’s lack of determination, his dependence on his wife, and his prejudice, which contrasts with the O’Neills’ strength when nobody bails the glover. Edgeworth introduces a familiar reference to Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* when Widow O’Neil has to resort to a pawnbroker who pledged “goods to treble the amount of the debt” (Edgeworth, *Popular* 272) to obtain ready money for her son’s release. Interestingly, the bad experience has a positive effect on O’Neill, who grows against adversity and becomes a saver: “it made him resolve to retrench his expenses in time, to live more like a glover, and less like a gentleman; and to aim more at establishing credit, and less at gaining popularity. He found, from experience, that good friends will not pay bad debts” (Edgeworth, *Popular* 273). From Edgeworth’s perspective in 1799, this fact symbolized the condition of Ireland if the Union was finally fulfilled.

4. As good as an Englishman born

At this point of analysis, attention must be paid to the editorial apparatus that surrounds the tale and makes explicit the didactic goal. The preface signed by Richard Lovell Edgeworth introduces *Popular Tales* as “a succession of stories, adapted to different ages, sexes and situations in life [that] will not be rejected by the public” (iii) since they do not “offend against

morality, tire by their sameness, or disgust by their imitation of other writers” (iv). Edgeworth clearly intends these tales for a different readership than her *Tales of Fashionable Life* since this story is directed to those who are not the nobility, the clergymen or the gentlemen: in *Popular Tales*, she wants to depict the working classes. In the first edition, “The Limerick Gloves” is divided into eight chapters which were imposed by the publisher to the Edgeworths’ discomfort: “Whatever merit the heads of the chapter in the following stories may have, it must be attributed to the editor, as they were inserted by him” (Edgeworth 1804: iv). Interestingly, in later editions they are reduced to just two parts. Editorial control parallels the narrative control that is so evident in the story and is related to Edgeworth’s didacticism. Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace argues that this didacticism precisely sprang from the pressure that Maria endured as a “daddy’s girl” and from her desire for paternal sanction (7, 9; see also Fernández, “Inordinate”). Richard Lovell Edgeworth generally gave Maria the idea of the tale and functioned as a “proof reader”, and Butler admits that distinguishing what the father and the daughter wrote is sometimes a difficult task (285). However, “The Limerick Gloves” might have been relatively free from paternal control: Maria included the story among the tales she composed “whilst [her] father was out somewhere or other, or purpose to be read on is return” (Letter to Sophy Ruxton, November 1803; qtd. in Butler 288).

Irony helps Edgeworth acknowledge a tradition she now wants to repudiate: the tradition of cursing the Irish. The narrator is defined as pro-Irish and the ironic treatment of Mr. Hill’s apprehensions reveals a condemnation of Irish phobia. Edgeworth would elaborate on this in later stories where the didactic tone will be less marked than in “The Limerick Gloves”. The narrator explains that “a Roman Catholic *must* be a very wicked dangerous being” (Edgeworth, *Popular* 263) and refers to “those *prudent* men of Hereford, who were of his own opinion, about the perilous hole under the cathedral” (Edgeworth, *Popular* 266-7, my italics) and “these *over-wise* politicians” (Edgeworth, *Popular* 267, my italics) who devise a way to take O’Neill into custody and whose ignorance Edgeworth highlights. O’Neill also becomes “Our Irish hero” (Edgeworth, *Popular* 267), and the narrative silences are likewise significant and tinted by didacticism: “How Mr. Hill made the discovery of this debt to the grocer agree with his former notion, that the Irish glover had always money at command, *we cannot well conceive; but anger and prejudice will swallow down the grossest contradictions without difficulty*” (Edgeworth, *Popular* 268, my italics). Mr. Hill’s ignorance is repaid with Mrs. Hill’s gossip, so when the former forbids all communication between Phoebe and O’Neill, Mrs. Hill tells everybody “all that she knew, and all that she did not know; and [she endeavoured] *to find out a secret where there was none to be found*” (Edgeworth, *Popular* 264, my italics). The narrator mocks the “*eminent service*” (Edgeworth, *Popular* 274, my italics) that Mr. Hill had done to Hereford after uncovering O’Neill’s supposed plot, and “his *dexterity*” (Edgeworth, *Popular* 274, my italics) “[a]fter arranging all this most *judiciously* and *mysteriously* with the friends who were exactly of his own opinion” (Edgeworth, *Popular* 275, my italics), but O’Neill’s involvement is never properly investigated. Phoebe’s father is always treated like a puppet; he lacks determination and is too easily led by his imagination. He culminates his career by cryptically –, and ridiculously – delivering this “*solemn speech*” (Edgeworth, *Popular* 279, my italics):

What I am thinking of will be known to you in due time; but not now, Mrs. Hill therefore, pray no questions, or teizing [sic], or pumping. What I think, I think; what I say, I say, what I know, I know and that is enough for you to know at present: only this, Phoebe, you did very well not to put on the Limerick gloves, child. What I know, I know. Things will turn out just as I said from the first. What I say, I say; and what I think, I think; and this is enough for you to know at present. (Edgeworth, *Popular* 278-279)

The obscurity attributed to O'Neill also surrounds Mr. Hill showing that colonial fantasies can over-ride more rational modes of perception. Both the section dealing with Mr. Hill's dream and the character of the fortune-teller stand in for the lack of rational thought and the rejection of superstition, which is, however, a frequent motif in Edgeworth's fiction (Fernández "Enlightened"). The fortune-teller is supposedly the successor of Bampfylde Moore Carew (1696-1749) and he is inspired on a real character.² The false image of O'Neill that Mr. Hill is sponsoring coincides with Carew's image of a rogue and a rascal. Edgeworth comes to say that racism is not based on rational belief. The oneiric element is paramount and Mr. Hill – and not O'Neill – endures a debilitating psychological trial similar to young Harrington's. Mr. Hill's dream corresponds with a very confused mind, and his wig – the symbol of rationality – even falls off:

he dreamed of blowing up cathedrals, and of oak-bark floating upon the waters and the cathedral was, he thought, blown up by a man dressed in a pair of woman's Limerick gloves, and the oak-bark turned into mutton-steaks, after which his great dog Jowler was swimming; when, all on a sudden, as he was going to beat Jowler for eating the bark transformed into mutton steaks, Jowler became Bampfylde the second king of the gypsies; and, putting a horsewhip with a silver handle into Hili's hand, commanded him three times, in a voice as loud as the town crier's, to have O'Neill whipped through the market place of Hereford: but, just as he was going to the window to see this whipping, his wig fell off and he awoke. (Edgeworth, *Popular* 279-280)

Through Mr. Hill, Edgeworth criticizes selfishness and disregard for others. The fortune-teller is consulted by ignorant people, servant-maids and apprentices who are at the same level as Hereford people in the tale: "it was whispered that he was resorted to, secretly, by some whose education might have taught them better sense" (Edgeworth, *Popular* 278). English backwardness is now at the core of the tale. Mr. Hill goes to see the conjuror with a purpose: "I shall swear examinations against O'Neill without waiting for attorneys. I will follow my own way in this business: I have always found my own way best" (Edgeworth, *Popular* 280). Entering Bampfylde the second's temporary palace means leaving aside rationality and being ruled by the oracular verses "Now take my word,/Wise man of Hereford,/ None in safety may be,/Till the Irishman doth flee" (Edgeworth, *Popular* 283). The editor adds a note about how this impostor took advantage of mischievous incredulity in real life (Edgeworth, *Popular* 290). The gypsy's wig is also caught upon a twig and he is fittingly punished because he tells lies. O'Neill, the Irishman, never does.

Irishness is not solely concentrated in the figure of O'Neil: Paddy and the hay-makers are also representatives of the Emerald Isle and have the positive connotations of humility and humanity. The Defenders are alluded to in the tale as ignorant and poverty-stricken houghers and rick-burners when Paddy M'Cormack confesses pulling down Mr. Hill's rick of bark for "resentment for the insulting arrest of his countryman in the streets of Hereford, had instigated his fellow haymakers to this mischief: he headed them and thought he was doing a clever spirited action" (Edgeworth, *Popular* 285). Though their actions are not supported by the narrative voice, their motivations are explained in the tale.

For Sharon Murphy, Edgeworth diffuses explosive issues of class and racial identity by envisaging a future in which different societies and social orders reach accommodation through mutual respect (109). No Edgeworth's tale can ignore the family's reliance on enlightened philosophy to restore social order. The rational element here is the marshal who clears up misunderstandings at the end when he proposes a deal to Mr. Hill: "Will you tell me honestly whether, now that you find this Mr. O'Neill is neither a dog killer nor a puller down of bark-

ricks you feel that you could forgive him for being an Irishman, if the mystery, as you call it, of the hole under the cathedral was cleared up?”(Edgeworth, *Popular* 300-1). The trial precipitates Mr. Hill’s enforced conversion for a single reason: he “was a good deal alarmed, by the fear of its being known, in Hereford, that he was on the point of swearing examinations against an innocent man, upon the evidence of a dog stealer and a gipsy” (Edgeworth, *Popular* 297). Mr. Hill has mixed feelings and is ashamed: “The fear of ridicule was struggling with the natural positiveness [sic] of his temper: he was dreadfully afraid that the story of his being taken in, by the king of the gypsies, would get abroad and, at the same time, he was unwilling to give up his prejudice against the Irish glover” (Edgeworth, *Popular* 299). The Hills eventually change their opinion of O’Neill, but Mr. Hill’s hypocrisy is incredible at this point:

As to the matter of his being an Irishman, I have nothing to say to it : I am not saying any thing about that, for I know we are all born where it pleases God; and an Irishman may be as good as another. I know that much, Mr. Marshal; and I am not one of those illiberal-minded ignorant people that cannot abide a man that was not born in England. Ireland is now in his majesty’s dominions, I know very well, Mr. Mayor; and I have no manner of doubt, as I said before, that an Irishman born may be as good, almost, as an Englishman born. (Edgeworth, *Popular* 301).

Though irony helps to make Edgeworth’s aim explicit, the constraints of the narrative form, as a tale for young people, imposes this unsatisfying ending. Mr. Hill is featured as a hypocrite who finally gives up and accepts the lovers’ wedding: “and no perfume ever was so delightful to her [Phoebe’s] lover as the smell of the rose-leaves, in which they [the gloves] had been kept” (Edgeworth, *Popular* 307-8). The final image of the protagonists’ wedding suggests the political union between Ireland and England: “The tanner and the glover of Hereford became, from bitter enemies, useful friends to each other; and they were convinced, by experience, that nothing could be more for their mutual advantage than to live in union” (Edgeworth, *Popular* 308).

5. Conclusion

“The Limerick Gloves” ultimately turns into a narrative of fear and an anatomy of prejudice. Edgeworth warns of the dangers of the imagination. However, the tale is deprived of deep psychological analysis. The historical context is just alluded to and the religious conflict is not solved: the couple does get married, but nothing is said about conversion, a topic that will appear in later stories, like *Harrington* (1817).

In this tale, and as usual in Edgeworth’s fiction – the case of *The Absentee*, for instance (Fernández “Manoeuvring”) –, the daughter is her mother’s pawn and the fact of wearing old mittens signifies Phoebe’s social humiliation and devaluation echoing Ireland’s marginal status. By including a love plot, Edgeworth chronicles the emotional cost of prejudice because Phoebe is ready to sacrifice herself for O’Neill and patriarchy is blind to this fact. Her attitude echoes Maria’s secondary editorial role regarding Richard Lovell.

“The Limerick Gloves” is as much about Ireland as about England because, instead of ignoring some negative images about the Irish, Edgeworth incorporates many negative images of the English: they lack self-confidence; they are easily manipulated; they are anxious, not enlightened; and they are hypocritical. Obviously, the Edgeworths were sending out messages to the English audience. The tale illustrates the Edgeworths’ political position which will later evolve to disbelief in Maria’s case. In fact, “The Limerick Gloves” is just in the middle of a process that goes from the Edgeworths’ aim of making fun of England – Ireland is then a fool who takes of the bells on his head and places them on that of England, as the Edgeworths state

at the end of *Essay on Irish Bulls* (187) – to her portrait of the perversion of Ireland in the hands of Irish absentees and finally to Edgeworth’s repeal (or rejection) of the Union in a letter to her brother, Michael Pakenham Edgeworth: “It is impossible to draw Ireland as she now is in a book of fiction – realities are too strong, party passions too violent to bear to see, or care to look at their faces in the looking-glass. The people would only break the glass, and curse the fool who held the mirror up to nature – in a fever” (qtd. in Butler 452, dated 14th February 1834). Edgeworth would pay a high price for her portrait of Ireland in criticism at the time: Claire Connolly states that she failed to make her confessional affiliations clearer and current accounts of Edgeworth as an evangelical supporter refract those of an earlier period (138). Nevertheless, in “The Limerick Gloves” Edgeworth focuses on the social impact of stereotypes and shows how being Irish acquires a new meaning when confronted with being English. Perhaps now, on the 250th anniversary of Edgeworth’s birth, that is precisely her greatest legacy: her capacity to question appearances and mock prejudice.

Notes

¹ This essay is part of the outcome of the University of A Coruña research network “Rede de Lingua e Literatura Inglesa e Identidade III” ED431D2017/17.

² *The Surprising Adventures of Bampfylde Moore Carew, King of the Beggars* (1745) was a best seller throughout the next hundred years in numerous editions as books and chapbooks. Carew became a nationally known character, appealing to a provincial audience and claimed to have been elected King of the Gypsies upon the death of Clause Patch. The ceremony described reproduces one from Thomas Harman’s *Caveat for Common Cursitors*, via the popular play *The Beggars’ Bush* by Francis Beaumont (Fisher 2016).

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