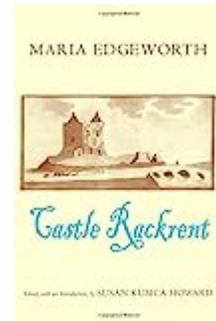




**Maria Edgeworth.** *Castle Rackrent.* Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2007. xxxviii + 87 pp. \$12.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87220-877-3.



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## Castle Rackrent: Redux?

In her “Note on the Text” to the latest published edition of Maria Edgeworth’s short novel, *Castle Rackrent*, editor Susan Kubica Howard explains that she “ha[s] annotated the novel with an eye to providing an undergraduate reader with the tools to read this edition as easily and fully as possible, and a more advanced reader the sources to go further in-depth with his or her inquiries” (p. xxxvi). To that end, Howard provides an introduction that examines the text and Edgeworth’s authorship from a variety of perspectives, as well as footnotes that define Irish usages and offer historical or literary contextualization. Howard also converts Edgeworth’s own footnotes to endnotes, relocating them after the glossary and providing additional editorial footnotes to gloss the author’s own. While some of the editorial annotations will likely prove helpful for readers new to *Castle Rackrent* and to an Irish context more generally, the intended “more advanced” readers may have some reservations about this edition of the novel.

Howard’s edition is the latest in a string of reprints of this small but complicated novel written during the time of the Act of Union. These include, most recently,

the New Riverside Edition, and the Pickering and Chatto edition.[1] The steady activity in reissuing the novel attests to consistent interest in Edgeworth’s canon and Irish women’s authorship more generally, and perhaps to growing interest in the nature of the nineteenth-century Irish novel in recent critical debate.

What may be most helpful here is the provision in this edition of definitions from a variety of sources, ranging from the *Old English Dictionary* to earlier editions of the novel—usually the Oxford University Press editions edited by George Watson {1964 and 1995} and Marilyn Butler’s 1992 Penguin edition. Expressions in the text that may be unfamiliar; examples of Hiberno-English, political terms, and relevant English and Irish history are lucidly and concisely defined, which would invariably assist the new reader. Given that many of these definitions are actually drawn from earlier editions, however, one cannot help but wonder about the originality of this edition’s contribution.

The introduction also provides contexts that would assist a reader new to the history of Ireland. In order to situate the narrative and composition times of the novel,

Howard broadly reviews the plantation of Ireland, the Penal Laws, absenteeism, and the events of 1782-1801 in a section entitled "Historical and Literary Contexts." While clearly an overview, such contextualization would certainly help an undergraduate reader ground his or her reading and understand the forces at work on Edgeworth at the time of the novel's composition.

Perhaps most interesting is Howard's literary placement of Edgeworth in this section of her introduction. Clearly approaching from an eighteenth-century perspective, Howard traces Edgeworth's compatibility with Charlotte Lennox and Susan Ferrier, aligning the three authors in terms of their use of a colonial setting. She also traces Edgeworth's "debt to Defoe and Richardson" and her seeming sensitivity to the Romantic Movement through "her valuation ... of common language and subjects" (p. xxiii). While not entirely original, this reminder that Edgeworth hailed from a wider British eighteenth-century literary milieu is useful in situating the author's work. Howard's review of the influence of *The Black Book of Edgeworthstown*, a family memoir written by Richard Edgeworth in the 1760s, also provides a relevant context within which to view the work (pp. xxiv-xxxi).

These potential strengths of the edition also prove to be its greatest weakness, however; for the editor's treatment of the novel risks downplaying the significant complexity that makes *Castle Rackrent* a must-read in the first place. While providing an array of contexts may help a novice reader to approach the text, the ordering of categories in the introduction is a bit illogical and sometimes misleading. For example, Howard begins her introduction with a section entitled "Composition, Publication, and Early Reception." Her suggestion that "Edgeworth may have created the Glossary to clarify and expand on cultural phenomena...to better represent the gifts Ireland would bring to a union" (pp. x-xi). presents a fairly unproblematic view of the glossary, which is generally recognized as at least potentially subversive. It is not until the last section of the introduction, strangely entitled "Unions," that Howard returns to the glossary and recognizes the importance of the editorial apparatus; moreover, she alludes to very little of the large body of scholarly work discussing this crucial aspect of the novel.[2] (It is possible that this edition was delayed in publication, as its most recent works cited were published in 2002, which may account for some of the more surprising oversights, but not all.)

Similarly, in arguing Edgeworth's sensitivity to the Romantic Movement, Howard seems to imply that Thady

M'Quirk is, in fact, relaying "a plain unvarnished tale" (a somewhat reductive reading of the *Lyrical Ballads* [1798], as well). Again, only much later in her introduction does Howard address the common critical understanding that Thady is anything but reliable. Such curious divisions in discussing these aspects of the novel downplay what is generally considered among the most important elements of the text.

The decision to remove Edgeworth's own notes from the corresponding pages and to move them to the very end is perhaps the most problematic editorial move. This edition adheres to Edgeworth's 1832 edition of *Castle Rackrent*, "because it was the last edition for which Edgeworth's oversaw revisions" (p. xxxiv). Ironically, both decisions undermine Howard's own recognition of Edgeworth's eighteenth-century literary milieu, both by disrupting the conventional eighteenth-century placement of notes and by privileging a much later version of the text.[3] Just as importantly, relocating Edgeworth's own notes ruptures the visual effect of the competing editorial voice that so problematizes and enriches this work. Without seeing the contest between these competing voices in the text written out spatially on the page, it is difficult to appreciate the complexity of the novel and the difficulty these editorial gestures present.

There are several such moments in this edition of *Castle Rackrent* (which space precludes addressing) that reinforce the sense that this novel, and its historical and cultural placement, may not have been entirely digested before it was edited; for example, see the discussion of why Edgeworth "chose" to use English rather than Irish in writing the novel (pp. xxiv-xxv). Ultimately, Howard's new edition may prove helpful to a reader new to Ireland and this novel because of the accessibility and clarity of most of its glosses. However, the structure and argument of the introduction—which, regrettably, also has many painfully long sentences and awkward constructions—and the relocation of Edgeworth's own notes compromise the ability of this edition to support more sophisticated readings of this novel.

#### Notes

[1]. The New Riverside edition is entitled *Two Irish National Tales, Maria Edgeworth's Castle Rackrent and Sydney Owenson's The Wild Irish Girl*, ed. M. Smith (Boston: Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005). The Pickering and Chatto edition is edited by Marilyn Butler, Jane Haville Desmarais, and T. O. McLoughlin (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1999).

[2]. One might consider, for example, Mary Jean Corbett, "Another Tale to Tell: Postcolonial Theory and the Case of *Castle Rackrent*," *Criticism* 36, no. 3 (Summer 1994): 383-400; Kathryn Kirkpatrick, "Putting Down the Rebellion: Notes and Glosses on *Castle Rackrent*, 1800," *Áire-Ireland* 30, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 77-90; or Rebecca Shapiro, "Educating the English: Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* and *Essay on Irish Bulls*," *Women's Writing* 10, no. 1 (2003): 73-92

[3]. See, in contrast, the Smith edition, "Note on the Texts" p. 16.

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