Maria Edgeworth’s *The Grateful Negro*: A Site for Rewriting Rebellion

Elizabeth S. Kim

The Great Rebellion of 1798 in Ireland generated literary responses by Irish writers on both sides of the political divide: those siding with the Catholic and Dissenter insurgency and those aligned with the Anglo-Irish Protestant ruling class.¹ The Anglo-Irish novelist Maria Edgeworth (1768–1849) contributed to this literary production, notably in her Irish novels *Castle Rackrent* (1800) and *Ennui* (1832). Tom Dunne and Mitzi Myers, while advancing different, if not contrary, arguments, have discussed the ways in which Edgeworth’s personal experiences with the traumatic events of 1798 shaped her literary treatment of peasant rebellion and warfare.² According to

¹ The events of 1798 found a range of literary expression in Ireland for decades after the rebellion. Songs and poems, collected and published in R.R. Madden, *Literary Remains of the United Irishmen of 1798, and selections from other popular lyrics of their times* (Dublin, 1846) became associated with the period’s nationalist and unity group, the United Irishmen. Ballads can also be found in Richard Musgrave, *Memoirs of the Different Rebellions in Ireland*, 2 vols (Dublin, 1801). Anglo-Irish Protestant concerns about the decline of the "Ascendancy" government following 1798 reverberated into the 1830s in a series of novels by Maria Edgeworth, Charles Robert Maturin, and Lady Morgan. I wish to thank Christopher Fox and the NEH Seminar, “Anglo-Irish Identities, 1600–1800,” at the University of Notre Dame (Summer 2001), for providing an invaluable foundation for this article. Seminar participants Dan Ross and Andy Smyth and department colleague Michael Longrie read and offered perceptive comments on earlier drafts of this article.


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Dunne, *Castle Rackrent* and *Ennui*, novels written at the time of the rebellion or whose time frame covers the period of the rebellion, employ "literary techniques used to avoid confronting [the horror of 1798] directly, techniques of distancing, masking, avoidance and transference." In a related discussion on Edgeworth’s treatment of sudden reversals of fortune (including those effected by revolution), Clíona ÓGallchoir asserts that Edgeworth minimizes the significance of the 1798 rebellion in *Ennui* because she “seeks to make a more general argument about the transient nature of violent upheaval and its consequences.” In fact, as ÓGallchoir points out, for Lord Glenthorn, the central character in *Ennui*, the 1798 rebellion represents merely “one more temporary distraction from ennui," the disease plaguing Glenthorn—and, more generally, the privileged class to which he belongs—and not the traumatic historical event that it actually proved to be. Edgeworth’s indirect responses, in her fictions, to events of 1798 are rooted in her status as a member of the ruling Anglo-Irish landed minority. The present study builds on Dunne’s and ÓGallchoir’s discussions to examine a short story by Edgeworth entitled *The Grateful Negro* (written in 1802), which also relies on understatement, masking, and containment to rewrite the events of 1798.

*The Grateful Negro* is one of eleven short stories in the collection entitled *Popular Tales* (1804). The eleven stories are set in a range of British settings, from specific regions in England such as Cornwall and Hereford to colonial outposts such as India, China, America, Jamaica, and Constantinople. Noting the varied settings, Gary Kelly has described the eleven stories as collectively representing “Britain and its empire as a complex of national-imperial similarity in local difference.” Edgeworth’s intended audience for this broad sampling of British imperial contexts was large and varied. According to her father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth (1744–1817), who wrote the preface


3 Dunne, 17.

4 Clíona ÓGallchoir, “Maria Edgeworth’s Revolutionary Morality and the Limits of Realism,” *Colby Quarterly* 36 (June 2000), 95.

5 ÓGallchoir, 95.

to the *Popular Tales*, the “succession of stories” was intended as
“instruction, in the dress of innocent amusement” to “the wise and
good of all ranks” in Great Britain, “adapted to different ages, sexes,
and situations in life.” The varied British settings depicted in the tales
allowed the Edgeworths to disseminate their particular colonialist
vision to a wide range of readers in England, Ireland, and other British
colonial outposts.

This issue of Edgeworth’s close collaborative relationship with her
father has led scholars to debate Edgeworth’s location in the
“complicity/resistance” dialectic *vis-à-vis* British colonialism in Ireland.
Many feminist scholars have sidestepped the issue, directing their
attention to Edgeworth’s relatively progressive writings on women’s
education, and thereby situating her squarely in the early feminist camp.
Other scholars, notably Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, have discussed
Edgeworth’s vexed complicity with patriarchal colonialism, rooted
primarily in her close literary collaboration with her father and her vocal
and unflagging support for his philosophies, especially with regard to
Irish tenantry. Along similar lines, Michael Hurst has described
Edgeworth as “something between a colonial civil servant and a
missionary rescuing the [Irish peasant] masses from inferior material
and spiritual practices.” Mary Jean Corbett has delineated even more
critically the nature of the Edgeworths’ colonialist agenda: the
Edgeworths “were indebted to and dependent on those ‘inhabitants of

7 *The Grateful Negro*, written in 1802, was published in 1804 in a three-volume collection
entitled *Popular Tales*. These tales were indeed popular, undergoing numerous editions
throughout the nineteenth century. While I consulted the first edition of *The Grateful Negro*,
references are to the second edition of *Popular Tales* (1807).

8 Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Their Fathers’ Daughters: Hannah More, Maria Edgeworth, and
Patriarchal Complicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Miriam Leranbaum,
“Mistresses of Orthodoxy: Education in the Lives and Writings of Late Eighteenth-Century
Jean Corbett discusses the way in which *Castle Rackrent* and *The Absentee* are inescapably
rooted in Edgeworth’s class interests: “Edgeworth’s act of linguistic appropriation [in
assuming the voice of the Irish steward Thady Quirk in *Castle Rackrent*] repeats and
reproduces other acts of colonization.” “Another Tale to Tell: Postcolonial Theory and the
Case of *Castle Rackrent*,” *Criticism* 36 (1994), 391. Corbett also discusses the influence of
Burkean notions of proper gendered conduct and familial relations in Edgeworth’s *The
Absentee*, especially its depiction of the Dashfort women and Lady Conbrony, who
demonstrate transgressive social or sexual desires that threaten the stability of patriarchy.
See “Public Affections and Familial Politics: Burke, Edgeworth, and the ‘Common

9 Michael Hurst, *Maria Edgeworth and the Public Scene* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami
the country' whom, through the cultivation of paternalism, they sought to constitute ideologically as wholly indebted to and dependent on them.”

My view of Edgeworth’s location in the “complicity-resistance” matrix largely echoes the latter camp: all of Edgeworth’s writings on British colonialism—her Irish novels, her non-fictional works, and within the narrower confines of The Grateful Negro—betray an alliance with her class interests. And while the nature of the Edgeworthian colonialist agenda was progressive and reformist for its time period—for example, following her father’s model, Edgeworth consistently condemned abusive and negligent forms of landlordism—still, her writings, in total, fail to question the colonialist system itself, both its existence and moral soundness.

As the title suggests, The Grateful Negro is set not in 1798 Ireland but in the British colony of Jamaica and provides a fictionalized account of the 1760 slave revolt on the West Indian island. Written only a few years after the harrowing events of 1798 and in the wake of the contentious Act of Union of 1800, this story posits and negotiates, in its representations of colonial dominance, failed resistance, and acquiescence in British-held Jamaica, Anglo-Irish colonialist concerns and anxieties about Dissenter and Irish Catholic peasant resistance in Ireland. The Jamaican plantation setting serves as a veiled context for the real colonial drama that Edgeworth is seeking to address. Like Dunne’s and ÓGallchoir’s assessments of Edgeworth’s narrative strategy in her Irish novels, my claim is that the tightly woven narrative in The Grateful Negro masks Edgeworth’s anxieties about rebellion and instead reconfigures it as a temporary and containable disturbance, perhaps even possessing socially purgative benefits. Edgeworth, in short, uses the story of slave rebellion in a faraway British colony to rewrite peasant rebellion at home, in the British “colony” that she intimately knows and in which her class is directly invested.

10 Corbett, “Another Tale to Tell,” 389.


12 In recent years the application of postcolonial discourse to Irish studies has prompted controversy: scholars such as Stephen Howe and Sean Connolly question the postcolonial
Edgeworth paved the way for linking the two colonial spaces—Jamaica and Ireland—in *The Grateful Negro* in an earlier work, *Belinda* (1801), written in 1800 and published only a year before she wrote *The Grateful Negro*. While the setting for this novel is England, Marilyn Butler asserts that by proposing a match between the heroine and the wealthy Jamaican Mr Vincent, a man of English descent whose family has built a sizeable fortune from its Jamaican plantations, Edgeworth shows "sympathy, a fellow-feeling, with West Indians: the qualities she gives to Vincent, warmth and impulsiveness, were ones normally attributed in her family circle to herself. Several times she connects, significantly, the *speech* of the Irish and the West Indian, two colonized peoples."  

Further to Butler's point, I suggest that Edgeworth's lighthearted, almost comic, depiction of the paternalistic relationship between the Creole Mr Vincent and his black Jamaican servant Juba establishes a model for the Jamaican master-slave relationship in *The Grateful Negro*, and more generally, for Edgeworth's idealized system of colonizer-colonized relations. Vincent, Juba's employer and protector, disabuses him (with Belinda's capable assistance) of the Obeah superstitions that terrify him. In turn, Juba, after whom Vincent has named his beloved dog, is faithful and childlike and demonstrates one of the most desirable traits of colonized subjects: gratitude.

Beyond the textual precedent established by Edgeworth in *Belinda*, historical realities would have urged the bridging of the two colonial spaces for Edgeworth's late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Irish audiences. The Irish nationalist and unionist group, the United Irishmen, for example, often drew upon American abolitionist discourse to promote the cause of Irish political independence. Kevin Whelan, using the evidence of material culture, has shown that the United Irishmen tactically urged "an explicit connection between political degradation in Ireland and the condition of slaves in supposition that Ireland was a British colony in the ways that, for example, America, the West Indies, and India were. Connolly desires to "normalize" English-Irish relations by characterizing British conquest of Ireland as one of many historical instances of territorial conquest by a dominant European nation of a weaker one. Howe, *Ireland and Empire, Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) and Connolly, "Eighteenth-Century Ireland: Colony or Ancien Régime?", *The Making of Modern Irish History*, ed. D. George Boyce and Alan O'Day (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 15-33.

America.”¹⁴ The frontispiece to a popular United Irish songbook of 1795, for example, shrewdly blends images of French and Irish mythological figures with references to the Irish Tree of Liberty and the chains of slavery, its caption reading “Irishmen Unite—Tear off your Chains and let MILLIONS BE FREE.”¹⁵ Such politically savvy tools of the Irish nationalist movement recall the figure of the prostrate and enchained African slave on the Josiah Wedgwood (1730–1795) abolitionist plate with its striking caption: “Am I Not a Man & a Brother?” Henry Grattan (1746–1820), a member of the Anglo-Irish Protestant ruling class and a leading spokesman for Irish independence, in arguing for the easing of penal laws against the Irish Catholic underclass, drew from the same rhetorical well. His memorable line, “The Irish Protestant will never be free while the Catholic is a slave,” invokes the language of abolition to indict exclusionary members of his own Anglo-Irish ruling class.

Moreover, the two colonial spaces—Jamaica and Ireland—had earlier been bridged by the Jamaican planter Bryan Edwards (1743–1800) in his popular History of the West Indies, a text from which Edgeworth is said to have “adopted—not stolen” her ideas about Jamaica and Jamaican plantation slavery for The Grateful Negro.¹⁶ Edwards’s text in its own way romanticizes Jamaican plantation society as a kind of structured commune, drawing explicit parallels that favour the living conditions of West Indian slaves over those of European peasants:

On the whole, notwithstanding some defects, let allowance be made for the


¹⁵ Whelan, Fellowship of Freedom, p. 37.

climate and soil, and it may be asserted with truth and modesty, that, if the situation of the slaves in the British West Indies were, in all cases, on a level with their circumstances in regard to food, lodging, and medical assistance, they might be deemed objects of envy to half the peasantry in Europe.  

Similarly, Edwards compares the living quarters of the African slaves in Jamaica with those of Irish peasants: "it may honestly be said, that, allowing for the difference of climate, they far excel the cabins of the Scotch and Irish peasants, as described by Mr. Young, and other travelers" (2:137–38). Because Edwards's history positions itself as an authoritative reference tool, objectively chronicling a region's history and recording observations about its topography, human inhabitants, and social institutions, the text essentially meets the unchallenged acceptance of its European readers, Edgeworth being one of them. The historical reality of limited first-hand travel to the New World also contributed to this largely uncontested reception.

On the level of biographical experience, the linking of the two colonial spaces would have resonated psychically for Edgeworth, whose family decided to return permanently to Ireland from England in 1782, when Edgeworth was fourteen years old. Drawing upon the "suggestive analogies between the situation of the Anglo-Irish in Ireland and other early nineteenth-century colonial settlers," Kowaleski-Wallace has claimed that the Edgeworths, like other English colonialists abroad, would have experienced firsthand the precarious state of being "frontiersmen" in hostile colonial territories. For example, peasant secret societies sprang up in the late eighteenth-century Irish countryside to resist landlord abuses, especially the seemingly arbitrary and self-serving eviction of tenants. Legal measures were also employed by an increasingly politically conscious Irish peasantry: according to Michael Hurst, "during the first half of the nineteenth century some forty-six government measures sought to establish 'Coercion' in the land" against Anglo-Irish landlords. Hurst sums up the analogous situation between Anglo-Irish landlords in the period and "New World" English colonizers: "'Whitefeet' rural terrorists [in Ireland] could ruin peace of mind every bit as effectively as 'Blackfoot' Red Indians."
These various threads—drawn from literary, cultural, and biographical sources—that tie Ireland to “New World” colonies thus collectively suggest the degree to which Edgeworth’s linking of the two colonial spaces in *The Grateful Negro* would have resonated with her contemporary Irish audience.

Intertextual Evidence:

*The Grateful Negro* versus Bryan Edwards’s *History of the West Indies*

While Edgeworth borrowed heavily from Edwards’s account of Jamaican colonialism and slave rebellion in *History of the West Indies* to create her fictionalized version in *The Grateful Negro*, she also made significant changes to Edwards’s text for two related purposes. The first was to draw a parallel between the two colonial spaces of Jamaica and Ireland; the second to serve her larger purpose of restoring narrative order—in the form of *The Grateful Negro*—to the disorder and disturbance of real-life rebellion. This latter purpose is perhaps most evident in Edgeworth’s treatment of violence, a central feature of Edwards’s account of the 1760 rebellion. Edwards does not hesitate to shock his white audiences with explicit passages about brutal acts perpetrated by revolting slaves against their white masters. Readers are told, for example, that on the morning of the rebellion “white people were in bed, everyone of whom [the slave insurrectionists] butchered in the most savage manner, and literally drank their blood mixed with rum. ... In one morning they murdered between thirty and forty Whites, not sparing even infants at the breast, before their progress was stopped” (2:65). Similarly, he includes graphic descriptions of punishments inflicted on the captured insurgents, including the execution—by electric shock treatment—of the Obeah sorcerer accused of instigating the insurrection (2:98).

Violence in Edgeworth’s narrative, by contrast, is appreciably muted. First, the slave insurrection in *The Grateful Negro* is essentially thwarted before it gets underway, thanks to the loyalty of a faithful slave and the calming leadership of his slave master Mr Edwards, who talks the insurgents out of executing their plan through “the influence of his character, the effect of his eloquence upon the minds of the people” (p. 210). Second, when violence or bloodshed occurs in the story, its description and consequences are largely glossed over. For example, while the colonial master Mr Edwards and his men set fire to the
sorceress’s hut, no one is killed in this corrective action. And while the rebel leader Hector stabs the title character Caesar in a moment of passionate vengeance, Caesar soon recovers. The only death that results from the insurrection scuffle—the death of the evil overseer Durant—is framed as just retribution for his abuses as an overseer. None of the insurgents meets any punishment in the narrative, and we are left to assume that the pardon extended by Mr Edwards to Hector, while prompted at the urging of the always loyal Caesar, will be extended to all the other rebels. These two changes in Edgeworth’s story carry implications for my central argument here that The Grateful Negro serves as a narrative that aims to diminish the psychically troubling aspects of the 1798 rebellion on the Anglo-Irish consciousness. By containing slave rebellion from the outset, Edgeworth rewrites the conflict as immediately subduable, if not avoidable. By muting its violence, she pacifies the real-life fears of colonial masters, both Jamaican and Anglo-Irish, while also redefining the basis of colonial rule from military dominance to paternalism.

Two other significant changes in Edgeworth’s description of the rebellion narrative accomplish her purpose in The Grateful Negro of shrinking the distance between the two colonial spaces and of implicitly sanitizing the Irish colonial space vis-à-vis her sanitized treatment of the Jamaican colonial space. Edgeworth’s addition of two strata of colonial society—masters and women—to her narrative, groups absent in Edwards’s account of the 1760 rebellion, serves, on one level, the obvious narrative purpose of weaving a richer fictional account than Edwards’s factual or ethnographic account was designed to provide. At the same time, however, the inclusion of these two groups in the rebellion narrative allows Edgeworth to make more explicit connections between Jamaican plantation society and Irish tenantry. The colonial masters, Mr Edwards and Mr Jefferies, are representative of the Anglo-Irish landlord, their overseers analogous to landlords’ agents, and their slaves to Irish peasant tenants. Their wives recall the wives of Irish landlords, figures integral to Edgeworth’s portrait of Anglo-Irish landed society.

As chief targets of Edgeworth’s social criticism in The Grateful Negro, the negligent colonial master Mr Jefferies and his self-indulgent wife remind readers of the many Anglo-Irish landlords and landladies in Edgeworth’s Irish novels who fill their empty lives with conspicuous consumption, self-indulgence, and an emulation of all things English.
In *The Grateful Negro*, such colonialist values threaten to undermine the entire colonial system: Mrs Jefferies's callous beating of a female slave who has accidentally torn one of her newly arrived English ball gowns triggers the insurrection conspiracy. Edgeworth thus weaves into her story the top tier of the colonial social structure not only to make an implicit connection between Jamaican plantation society and Irish tenancy, but also to locate a primary source of poor colonizer-colonized relations in colonialist abuses. Applied to Irish tenantry, this problem translates into the absentee Anglo-Irish landlord and family who are far more interested in the latest English fashions than in overseeing their responsibilities at home. But beyond the social attack, by portraying colonialist abuses in Jamaica, Edgeworth is also implying a solution for strained landlord-tenant relations in Ireland. Like the absentee or negligent Anglo-Irish landlords in her Irish novels, the abusive Jamaican colonial master in this story must reform his ways or face rebellion and elimination. Mr and Mrs Jefferies's fate—financial ruin and exile to England—well illustrates this Edgeworthian moral principle.

While Edgeworth’s story makes significant changes to Edwards’s *History of the West Indies*, it takes its basic ideological cue from Edwards’s text with regard to the promotion of paternalized colonialism. At the same time that Edwards’s text depicts the violent disruptions to the colonial order, it also sanitizes and romanticizes Jamaican plantation society by fashioning it as a kind of commune where the physical needs of its residents (food, shelter, clothing, and medical attention) are well provided for. That Edgeworth’s story presses this romanticized vision of plantation slavery and society to the extreme is evident in the story’s central conflict, which requires Caesar to choose between saving his beloved master’s life by revealing to him the rebellion conspiracy and saving his beloved Clara’s life by yielding to the demands of the rebel leaders and joining the rebellion. The romance narrative and the rebellion plot are thus made to intersect. Caesar’s choice—to put his master’s life above his wife’s life and his own freedom—registers for Edgeworth the ultimate triumph of colonial paternalism. This victory was sealed when the colonial master Mr Edwards had earlier demonstrated his trust in Caesar by giving him a sharp knife with which to prune the tamarind tree in his yard. Caesar’s response to this paternalistic gesture makes clear his devotion: “in a transport of gratitude, [Caesar] swore that, with this knife, he would stab himself to the heart sooner than betray his
master!” (p. 197). Edgeworth’s romanticization of the slave-master relationship, positioning it even above the conventional matrimonial bond, not only supports the rightness of colonial lordship but also effectively defuses the highly charged nature of the rebellion. Slave rebellion, then, gets reconstituted as a kind of adolescent rebellion against a stern and distant father.

A further instance of Edgeworth’s romanticized treatment of the colonial project is found in her picturesque description of a holiday that the generous Mr Edwards provided to his slaves on the very evening of their uprising. Echoing travel narratives by British women of the period,20 Edgeworth’s aestheticized description of the festival not only elides the ugly reality of slave labour on the plantation, but also serves as a counterpoint to the pending rebellion stirring on the Jefferies plantation. Edgeworth counterbalances the frightening reality of slave hostility and unrest on the Jefferies plantation by depicting the slaves on the Edwards plantation as a company of merrymakers. The cornucopia highlighted in the scene—“While some were dancing, and some playing on the tambourine, others appeared among the distant trees, bringing baskets of avocado pears, grapes, and pineapples, the produce of their own provision-grounds” (pp. 203–4)—attests to the virtues of colonialism. The passage celebrates the colonialist values of hard work and individual responsibility for the land and connects them to the yielding of nature’s bounty. Nature’s “cooperation” in generating colonial wealth of course confirms the rightness of the colonial project. The display of colonial success is ultimately owing to Mr Edwards’s paternalism, which Edgeworth is careful to underscore. By contrasting the festive spirit on the Edwards plantation with the deep strife on the Jefferies plantation, Edgeworth offers benevolent paternalism as the antidote for strained master-slave relations and in the end for slave rebellion. Beyond colonial order, colonial harmony is shown to be achievable through this picturesque image.


Evidence from various Edgeworth family documents suggests the degree to which the looming threat of Irish peasant rebellion weighed on Maria Edgeworth’s consciousness in 1802, only four years after the Great Rebellion, when she wrote *The Grateful Negro*. During the rebellion her family had been forced to leave their home in Edgeworthstown and flee to the Protestant stronghold of Longford. There the family was besieged by angry mobs that twice nearly lynched her father. But years before the distressing events of 1798, two equally disturbing episodes of Irish Catholic mob action against the family, first in 1641 and then in 1689, are recorded in the Edgeworth family chronicles. The former was triggered by civil unrest in England and the latter by the Jacobean uprising that was subsequently crushed by King William at the Battle of the Boyne, 1690. These two rebellions provide anchors for my argument that Edgeworth understood the precarious nature of her position as a member of a highly privileged yet deeply resented minority ruling class and that she tried to address these tensions by writing about them indirectly in her Irish novels and *The Grateful Negro*.

The 1641 Irish peasant rebellion involving the Edgeworth family occurred in the context of the great Ulster uprising of 23 October 1641. The Edgeworth family memoirs, *The Black Book of Edgeworthstown, 1585–1817*, written by Edgeworth’s grandfather Richard Edgeworth (1701–1770), makes clear the gravity of the danger faced by the family of Maria’s great-great-grandfather, John Edgeworth (d.1668), a captain in the army of Charles I. John Edgeworth’s family was in two locations at the time the rebellion broke out: John and his daughter Margaret were in Galway while his wife Mary and son John (later Sir John Edgeworth, 1638–1696) were dangerously isolated in the family estate at Crannelagh. In Galway, John and Margaret fled with other Anglo-Irish Protestants to a garret in an old house, where “they spent the greatest part of the day in prayer, expecting every hour to be

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21 Some population estimates put the Anglo-Irish ruling class at only 10 per cent of the total population of Ireland in the late eighteenth century.

22 *The Black Book of Edgeworthstown*, ed. Harriet Jessie Butler and Harold Edgeworth Butler (1927), compiles excerpts from the Edgeworth family memoirs written by Richard Edgeworth (1701–1770), Maria’s grandfather. References are to this edition.
murdered" (p. 69). Filtered through the eyes of the frightened ten-year-old Margaret, the story of her father's and her own traumatic escape from the hands of the Irish peasant mobs is deftly handled by Maria's grandfather to yield the desired abhorrent response from his Anglo-Irish audience:

most of the Protestant inhabitants were dragged out of their houses by priests and friars in their proper dresses, and had their throats cut and their bodies thrown into the streets or channels, so that, when the thunderstorm and rain began, their dead bodies were washed by the water which ran into the gutters to that degree that they literally ran down with blood. (p. 70)

Likewise, Richard Edgeworth's description of his great-grandmother Mary's victimization at the family estate of Crannelagh during the same uprising elicits a similarly unsettling reaction. Mary was apparently beaten, stripped naked, and chased out of her house by the angry Irish peasant mobs. Mary survived the incident and purportedly fled to Dublin, assisted in her escape by a few Irish peasants, including "a common Irishwoman" who lent her a dress. Her young son John was spared by the remarkable courage of one loyal Irish servant, "the faithful MacBrian Ferrell" who, at the peril of his own life, assuaged the vengeful mobs by feigning the execution of the child. He then saved Crannelagh Castle, the early Edgeworth estate, from being burned down by pointing the rebels to a portrait of Jane Tuite Edgeworth, the Roman Catholic mother of John Edgeworth, which was "painted on the wainscot with her beads and crucifix" (p. 13). Richard Edgeworth praises Ferrell for his bravery and cunning, which essentially secured the Edgeworth family home and lineage: "Thus by the fidelity of this poor Irishman, which got the better even of the false notions which the priests had inculcated and which they bound all their followers to obey under pain of damnation, to spare neither man, woman nor child of the heretics, the child was saved and restored to his friends" (p. 13). In both escape narratives—that of father and daughter and of mother and son—the vengeful and violent actions of the Irish Catholic rebels are made explicit, but in the latter report the important theme of the loyal servant takes centre stage. Edgeworth would later draw upon this theme in Castle Rackrent and, more directly relevant to our purposes here, in The Grateful Negro.

Edgeworth family encounters with Irish peasant rebellion appear twice more in the Edgeworth family chronicles. While the rebellions
of 1641 and 1798 were terrifying, they did not result in the permanent destruction of Edgeworth estates. In both insurrections the Edgeworth houses were spared by the Irish peasant mobs when the Edgeworth household’s prior kindesses to or gestures of alliance with Catholics came to be known. By contrast, the Irish Catholic uprising of 1689, triggered by James II’s attempt to win back the English throne, resulted in the burning down of the Edgeworth estate at Kilshrewley. Although no lives were lost in the hostile action, Lady Anne Edgeworth (1642–1714) and five of her children, aged one to sixteen, were forced to witness the torching of their house. Lady Anne’s husband Sir John Edgeworth was in England at the time, and three of her oldest sons were fighting on the side of King William. In this narrative the kind actions of a stranger named Mr Nugent “who treated them with great humanity” also saves the Edgeworth family until they are set free by William’s forces. Homeless, Lady Anne returned to England and relied on the generosity of her home town and kin to reclaim her old estate of Cronton Shaw in England, where she is said to have resided until her husband’s death (pp. 26–27).

These two compelling rebellion narratives, both recorded in Richard Edgeworth’s *Black Book of Edgeworthstown*, undoubtedly resonated with the Edgeworth family even before the frightening events of 1798. The Great Rebellion, however, pushed to the surface any latent fears the family may have had about Irish Catholic insurrection. In a letter to her cousin Sophy Ruxton, dated 19 September 1798, Edgeworth reveals that the episode has left her in a deeply agitated state: “I can talk think write of nothing but this affair my mind is so full of it.”23 Maria’s father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, was similarly distressed and even contemplated uprooting his family and permanently leaving Ireland. In a letter, 29 September 1798, to his new father-in-law Dr Daniel Augustus Beaufort, he wrote: “I declare to you most solemnly that I have lived in Ireland from no other motive than a sense of duty & desire to improve the circle round me—I shall lose about 10,000 pound sunk in this country by removal but I shall live the remainder of my life amongst men, instead of warring against savages.”24 While Beaufort persuaded his son-in-law not to carry out his plan, the distresses of 1798 clearly left an imprint on Richard Lovell Edgeworth’s family. This is seen in a letter


written by Maria to Sophy’s sister Letty two years after the rebellion. In it Edgeworth reveals both her continuing anxieties about peasant rebellion and the degree to which past family narratives about Roman Catholic rebellion still haunt her: she prays “that we may never be turned out in the same way” as the Lady Edgeworth “in the time of the last rebellion” who was “turned out naked.”

When the rebellion broke out in the summer of 1798, the Edgeworths were keenly aware of her family’s dangerous isolation in the countryside, especially since it recalled the similar predicaments of their ancestors in 1641 and 1689. On 7 September, when news reached the Edgeworths that the French armies had marched close to Edgeworthstown, Richard Lovell Edgeworth fled with his family to the town of Longford, about ten miles away. Maria was thirty years old at the time of the rebellion, and, as the unmarried eldest daughter of Richard Lovell Edgeworth, she was called upon to assume the role of substitute mother for her much younger half-siblings. At Longford, Edgeworth’s family was twice in danger of physical attack by angry mobs at Longford. Brian Hollingworth describes the ways in which the Edgeworths were besieged on all fronts during the uprising—the French and the Irish Catholics were menacing at Edgeworthstown; then at Longford, the Protestant mobs accused Maria’s father and brother of betraying them to the French troops by illuminating “the gaol to deliver it up to the French.” Bent on revenge for a presumed betrayal, the mob was only appeased when it believed that the English soldiers had taken Richard Lovell Edgeworth prisoner. He was later accosted by the same mob and nearly pelted to death with “hard turf, stones, and brickbats.” While it is true that the mobs at Longford were largely Anglo-Irish Protestant and their reason for attacking


26 Maria was the second of twenty-two children that Richard Lovell Edgeworth fathered with four wives.


28 According to Edgeworth, this alleged illumination of the jail to signal the French troops was utterly absurd: “Illuminated! What could be meant by the gaol being illuminated? My father had literally but two farthing candles, by the light of which he had been reading the newspaper late the preceding night. These however were said to be signals for the enemy!” Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth, Esq. Begun By Himself and Concluded By His Daughter Maria Edgeworth in Two Volumes (London: R. Hunter, 1820), 2:226, 230.
Richard Lovell Edgeworth was rooted in longstanding personal antipathies towards him, still the sense of instability and danger acutely felt by the Edgeworths in 1798 is ultimately traceable to the Irish Catholic uprising.

Edgeworth’s narrative about her family’s involvement in 1798, *Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth, Esq. Begun by Himself and Concluded by his Daughter Maria Edgeworth*, was recorded and published in 1820. One could argue that the narrative choices that she exercised in 1820 to recount events of 1798 benefited from the political stability granted to the Anglo-Irish ruling minority by the Act of Union of 1800. The Union, after all, despite the deep and widespread resentments it generated among the Irish populace as a whole, ultimately reinforced Anglo-Irish Protestant authority in the early nineteenth century. At the same time, however, the Union, and the fortified Protestant Ascendancy it generated, only strengthened Irish Catholic resolve to fight for independence. Daniel O’Connell, after decades of campaigning for Irish independence, took the bold step in 1823 of founding the Catholic Association, which organized large-scale agitation for Catholic Emancipation. Thus, while writing under the ostensible shield of a bolstered Protestant Ascendancy, Edgeworth, whether writing *The Grateful Negro* in 1802 or the *Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth* in 1820, never fully escaped the frightful possibility of *en masse* Irish Catholic protest and possible overthrow of the Dublin government. In the 1830s, Edgeworth expresses her great fear that the general restlessness among the Irish peasantry, purportedly motivated by reformist interests, could erupt at any moment into full-scale violent revolution, despite the now thirty-year union with England: “There is literally no rein of law at this moment to hold the Irish; and through the whole country there is what I cannot justly call a spirit of *Reform*, but a spirit of *REVOLUTION*, under the name of reform: a restless desire to overthrow what is, and a hope—more than a hope—an expectation, of gaining liberty or wealth, or both, in the struggle.”

Edgeworth’s fear that the discontent of the Irish peasantry would not end with the achievement of political freedoms but would lead to

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29 Ironically, Richard Lovell Edgeworth was accused by many Anglo-Irish peers of having secret political alliances with the Irish Catholics. As Marilyn Butler notes in *Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography*, Protestant suspicions of betrayal were not eased when the Edgeworth home was one of the few spared by the Catholic rebels (p. 139).

radical social and economic restructuring of Irish society is of course the subject of Castle Rackrent. The issue is briefly raised in The Grateful Negro when the Obeah sorceress Esther attempts to entice Caesar into joining the insurrection with promises of “Victory! Wealth! Freedom! and Revenge!” (p. 206). Caesar’s rejection of the rebels’ plan registers not only his devotion to his master Mr Edwards and the colonial system that he oversees but also his rejection of the alternative social model that the rebelling slaves envision. Analogously, Edgeworth rejects a similarly radical social restructuring in her homeland. This position is made clear in a letter written in the 1830s:

I am, and have been all my life, a sincere friend to moderate measures, as long as reason can be heard; but there comes a time, at the actual commencement of uproar, when reason cannot be heard, and when the ultimate law of force must be resorted to, to prevent greater evils. That time was lost in the beginning of the French Revolution—I hope it may not be lost in Ireland. It is scarcely possible that this country can now be tranquillised without military force to re-establish law; the people MUST be made to obey the laws, or they cannot be ruled after any concessions. Nor would the mob be able to rule if they got all they desire; they would only tear each other to pieces, and die drunk or famish SOBER. The misfortune of this country has been that England has always yielded to clamour what should have been granted to justice.31

Especially in the later years of her life, perhaps owing to a heightened sense of obligation to honour her father’s memory by affirming his vision of Irish tenantry, Edgeworth became increasingly conservative in her political views about Anglo-Irish rule. As her letter shows, she was convinced that the Irish peasantry was ill-equipped to rule itself and therefore needed the structure and instruction provided by the kind of tenantry system once modelled at Edgeworthstown.

The Grateful Negro as Rewriting Irish Peasant Rebellion

The Grateful Negro is a text determined to contain and domesticate rebellion, and in the end to protect the integrity of the colonial system. Edgeworth’s prescription for counteracting rebellion, while implied in the Edgeworth family rebellion narratives, is given full play in her short story. Her remedy for colonial instability is located fundamentally in a system of benevolent paternalism that is closely

31 Zimmern, pp. 185–86.
based on her father’s documented prescriptions for improving and modernizing the tenantry system in Ireland.32 Kelly has outlined the concrete changes actively promoted and implemented by Richard Lovell Edgeworth at Edgeworthstown.33

In sum, Kelly describes Richard Lovell Edgeworth’s tenantry system as one ideally rooted in “companionate, ‘egalitarian’ patriarchy exercised through the ‘domestic affections’ rather than physical or economic power.”34 Instruction of tenants, especially in terms of early modern British notions of industry and improvement of the land, constituted an important aspect of this model of paternalistic landlordism.35 This value is demonstrated in The Grateful Negro in Mr Edwards’s apportioning small plots of land to his slaves for private farming, in his rewarding his slaves with a system of wage labour for overtime work (presumably beyond the requisite sunrise to sundown), and in his urging his slaves to improve their land and general environs. Mr Edwards uses wages and land allotment as inducements to keep his slaves industrious, content, and loyal. This strategy was echoed by Richard Lovell Edgeworth, who “encouraged investment and improvement by tenants, increased arable land by such measures as draining bogs, and developed infrastructure.”36

Edgeworth shows the efficacy of both her father’s and her fictionalized patriarch’s strategy in the form of their subordinates’ absolute loyalty. In the Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth, Edgeworth repeatedly casts her father as a benevolent and fair-dealing landlord, his caring paternalism winning the loyalty of his tenants and servants even during the rebellion, similar to the way in which Mr Edwards is supported by his loyal slaves at the outset of the slave revolt. Richard Lovell Edgeworth in fact prided himself in being a fair-dealing and

32 See Desmond Clarke, The Ingenious Mr. Edgeworth (London: Oldbourne, 1965).
33 According to Kelly, specific measures enacted by Richard Lovell Edgeworth to improve Irish tenantry included ending “absentee management, middlemen, favoritism by religious sectarianism, and semifuedal dues” (89–93).
34 Kelly, 90.
35 This theme of improvement is echoed in Edgeworth’s Irish novels such as The Absentee, in which the O’Neills, tenants of the Clonbrony, wish to be rewarded for improving their plot of land with another lease. Edgeworth weaves this theme into The Grateful Negro. Mr Edwards’s ideal form of plantation economy is one that combines slave labour with wage labour. He is praised for urging industry and enterprise in his slaves and for rewarding them when they show the same.
36 Kelly, 90.
inclusive landlord with his Catholic tenants, boasting in 1798 that no tenant of his had ever been a Defender.\textsuperscript{37} To support this view of her father, Edgeworth says that “next to the safety of his own family, my father’s greatest anxiety was for his defenceless corps [a militia composed of servants and tenants].”\textsuperscript{38} Like Mr Edwards’s militia in \textit{The Grateful Negro}, which was composed of both white farm hands and African slaves, Richard Lovell Edgeworth’s corps consists of faithful Irish Catholic tenants. Further, both colonial masters do not hesitate to arm all their men with guns to protect their estates. \textit{The Grateful Negro} reports that “Mr. Edwards armed himself and the Negroes on his plantation, as well as the whites; they were all equally attached to him” (p. 207). Edgeworth makes clear in the \textit{Memoirs} that her father would have similarly armed all of his men if the guns he had ordered had arrived on time.\textsuperscript{39} For Edgeworth, the colonial master’s open distribution of weapons to his subordinates registers in the end the merits of the colonial master who has achieved such extraordinary levels of allegiance.

The paternalistic model of colonialism that Edgeworth subscribes to consists of a system of mutually beneficial exchanges between the benevolent colonizer and the grateful colonized. Thus it requires the co-operation—in the form of the adoption of the colonial master’s prescriptions for cultural reform and improvement as well as displays of loyalty to him—of those on the lower tier of the paradigm as well, whether Jamaican slaves or Irish tenants. In both the family rebellion narratives and in \textit{The Grateful Negro}, Edgeworth dramatically links the subordinates’ demonstration of loyalty to their colonial master’s survival, and, more generally, to the stability of the colonial system. Relying on hyperbole to make her point, Edgeworth frames the colonial master’s survival as a moral choice undertaken by individual servants. In the 1641 rebellion narrative, for example, the faithful


\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth}, 2:218.

family servant MacBrian Ferrell shows the depth of his devotion to the Edgeworth family by risking his own life to save the family estate and its male heir. Similarly, in John Edgeworth's narrative about the 1689 mob action, a kind stranger, known only as Mr Nugent, saves the family by providing shelter to the fleeing Edgeworths. And in the 1798 narrative the selflessness of the family's English housekeeper essentially protects the estate from destruction at the hands of the angry peasant mobs.  

In *The Grateful Negro*, Edgeworth develops more fully this theme of an exceptional servant saving the master's family. The loyal slave is made to face a series of increasingly vexing loyalty tests: first, Caesar must choose between joining his best friend Hector in the slave revolt and betraying his master: "the conflict [within Caesar] was violent, and painful. Gratitude at last prevailed: he repeated his declaration, that he would rather die than continue in a conspiracy against his benefactor!" (p. 187). For the second loyalty test, the conspirators force the assistance of Caesar's beloved wife Clara, who, unaware of the conspiracy plot but threatened by the Obeah sorceress, "conjured [her husband] to avert the wrath of the sorceress by obeying her commands, whatever they might be!" (p. 194). Again, Caesar, while moved to assuage his wife's fears by heeding her entreaty, remains firm in his devotion to his master. The final loyalty test is severe indeed, for it requires Caesar to choose to save either his wife's life or his master's by revealing to him the insurrection plot. The progressively demanding nature of the loyalty tests that Caesar is made to undergo makes perfect sense in terms of Homi Bhabha's argument about the ambivalent nature of colonial discourse. Such ambivalence is registered by both the colonizer and colonized in relation to each other and to the very colonial system under which they operate. For

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40 In the *Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth*, Edgeworth constructs the English housekeeper as a heroine of the rebellion episode. When the family carriage could not accommodate all the members of the Edgeworth household, the housekeeper selflessly offers to stay behind until the carriage can return from Longford for her. The peasant mob soon arrives at the Edgeworth estate and is ready to storm it when a rebel leader recognizes the housekeeper as the good woman who demonstrated charity toward his wife the year before, lending her "when in distress, sixteen shillings, the rent of flax-ground." Out of gratitude, he boldly places himself between the housekeeper and the angry mob, proclaiming that the estate should be spared and that he would risk his own life to ensure it because "the housekeeper, who was left in it, was a good gentlewoman ... and he would stand her friend now" (2.221). Edgeworth portrays two heroic figures in this episode, both of whom are defined by a capacity for gratitude and loyalty, traits shared by Caesar in *The Grateful Negro*. 
the colonizer, ambivalence manifests itself in many discursive expressions but perhaps most fundamentally in the stereotype, whether ostensibly “positive” or “negative.” Bhabha links this discursive mode to the discursive strategy of “fixity”: “Stereotype ... is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is ‘in place,’ already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated. ... For the stereotype must always be in excess of what can be empirically proved or logically construed.”

In *The Grateful Negro*, this tension between knowing the colonized subject, thereby deriving comfort from the familiarity of the fixed image, and the anxiety of not knowing him, which admits the possibility of potential subversion, is allayed through repeated demonstrations of loyalty, at increasingly higher calibrations of testing.

A more fundamental way in which Edgeworth employs repetition paired with stereotype to address colonial anxiety in *The Grateful Negro* is through the colonialist discursive practice of interpellation. Edgeworth’s strategy of calling the central character “the grateful negro”—like the Rackrents’ calling Thady Quirk in *Castle Rackrent* variously “honest Thady,” “old Thady,” and “poor Thady”—asserts not only the colonizer’s power to create an identity for the colonized, but, even more amazingly, to effect the colonized’s internalization of that imposed identity, which occurs with Caesar, and with Thady Quirk, if we read Thady as a non-duplicitious character. Edward Said has explained this colonialist discursive practice within the context of Orientalist discourse: “anyone employing orientalism, which is the habit for dealing with questions, objects, qualities and regions deemed Oriental, will designate, name, point to, fix, what he is talking or thinking about with a word or phrase, which then is considered either to have acquired, or more simply to be, reality. ... The tense they employ is the timeless eternal; they convey an impression of repetition and strength.”

Throughout *The Grateful Negro* we are repeatedly reminded of Caesar’s defining character—gratitude to his master Mr Edwards: Edgeworth literally begins and ends the story with the phrase, “the grateful negro”; the narrator repeatedly refers to Caesar by this tag phrase and continually reminds us of the many reasons for Caesar’s gratitude; moreover, even Caesar himself is employed as a

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spokesman for this colonial value. On the agonizing occasion of the second loyalty test, Caesar reminds his wife of all the benefits bestowed on them by their “benefactor,” including the very fact of their being together, which Mr. Edwards made possible by heeding Caesar’s plea that he purchase the two lovers from their dissolute and absentee former master so the two slaves could marry and remain together. The effect of this discursive strategy of affixing a designation to the colonized subject and constantly repeating that designation is an illusory yet comforting sense of knowing the subject by pinning him to the eternal present, thereby denying him the capacity for change, especially in the disturbing direction of subversive action.

The location within an individual servant of the moral agency which determines the fates of a slave master’s life, a rebellion, and ultimately a whole social structure effectively invites similar moral action from all Irish peasants with regard to peasant unrest and the welfare of their Anglo-Irish landlords within the context of political agitation. Individual loyalty to the system, as exercised by Caesar, is shown to yield maximum public and personal reward and happiness: Caesar’s decision to save his master’s life instead of his wife’s proves to be the morally right one because in the end it results in the quelling of the slave rebellion, the restoration of his “dead” wife Clara—Clara mysteriously recovers from the putative death trance she was placed under when “the opiate, which the pretended sorceress had administered to her, had ceased to operate” (p. 209)—and in the restoration of colonial stability. Edgeworth thus turns Caesar’s ghastly decision into an honourable one, one that yields first the public good (the upholding of the slave plantation system), and second the private good (the happy reunion of husband and wife). The willing subordination of individual desire by the colonial subject, whether colonizer or colonized—to save a best friend, to allay a wife’s fears by yielding to her entreaty, to save a wife’s life—for the good of the system of course constitutes a central tenet of colonialist discourse. Drawing a literal analogy to Anglo-Irish landlord and Irish tenant relations is not Edgeworth’s purpose here: she is not urging the literal sacrifice of best friends and wives by Irish peasants to their landlords in times of social instability. But in Caesar’s willingness to sacrifice his lifelong friend, his beloved wife’s peace of mind, and even her life, he reveals the fundamental object of the colonized’s fidelity—to the “benefactor” or master and the socioeconomic system that he oversees.
and represents. For, in Edgeworth’s colonial paradigm, all good things proceed from the good colonial father. Edgeworth is proposing an analogously symbolic devotion of Irish peasants—not to all Anglo-Irish landlords but to those who are deserving, to those demonstrating benevolent paternalism. By providing tenants with identity, security, and even prosperity, such a system need not fear rebellion because it possesses the built-in and, for the colonizer’s peace of mind, the static mechanism—in the form of grateful subordinates—to resist it.

Similarly, Edgeworth’s location of treachery in individual characters in *The Grateful Negro*—the wicked slave overseer Durant, the self-indulgent Anglophileic Mrs Jefferies, and the evil Obeah sorceress Esther—also suggests that rebellion and its attendant consequences may be contained. The source of social disruption in *The Grateful Negro* differs significantly from its counterpart—faceless mobs—in all three Edgeworth family rebellion narratives. The containment of rebellion’s source in individuals domesticates rebellion, stripping it of its formidable and faceless mob threat. Such containment suggests that if certain abusive or “loose cannon” individuals could be subdued or eliminated from the colonial narrative, then stability would be restored to the colonial order. Thus, in *The Grateful Negro*, the sadistic overseer is killed in the insurrection attempt; Esther the Obeah sorceress is in the end captured; and Mr and Mrs Jefferies are expelled from Jamaica and forced to return to England, “where they were obliged to live in obscurity and indigence” (p. 210). The elimination of these disruptive agents from the colonial scene promises a new colonial harmony.


With the three Irish peasant rebellions firmly etched in Edgeworth’s consciousness in 1802, and given the fact that the polemical Act of Union was only two years old, we can understand why Edgeworth would situate her anxieties about rebellion at home in a fictionalized retelling of rebellion in a faraway, romanticized colonial space. Arguably, the fact that her account of slave insurrection in Jamaica was based on an historical occurrence (the 1760 slave rebellion in Jamaica) makes her “revisionist” narrative more compelling and useful as an antidote to socioeconomic troubles at home. If a slave insurrection on a plantation colony could be shown to be resolvable
through mutually responsible actions, then logic would dictate that
the colonial divide in Ireland between the Anglo-Irish ruling class and
the Irish peasantry could surely be bridged as well. After all, the
colonial divisions in Jamaica are arguably more difficult to reconcile
than those in Ireland, since the colonial structure there operates not
on tenancy but on race-based slavery, and race as the *prima facie*
marker of difference between peoples, as Bhabha has argued, is
perhaps the most difficult to dismantle. This kind of comparative
reasoning, which suggests that the gap between Anglo-Irish Protestant
and Irish Catholic is narrower than that between British colonial
master and African slave, may have propelled Edgeworth’s effort to
rewrite peasant rebellion in Ireland as a story about a thwarted slave
rebellion in faraway Jamaica. On the other hand, seeking resolution
through comparison with an extreme paradigm may reveal the depth
of Edgeworth’s anxiety.

Edgeworth’s motives notwithstanding, for disenfranchised Irish
Catholic tenants, including those of Richard Lovell Edgeworth, their
relatively advantageous status in relation to Jamaican plantation slaves
would have provided little comfort. While Edgeworth and other Anglo-
Irish writers in the early nineteenth century attempted through various
discursive strategies to contain the impact of 1798, and more
generally, to control a culture’s narratives,43 the disaffected Irish
Catholic underclass would soon resist such colonialist containment by
means of organized political action.

University of Wisconsin, Whitewater

43 Here I refer to the connection between narrative and the shaping of national consciousness
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