

# Rereading Edgeworth's Cross-Writing.

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## Canonical "Orphans" and Critical *Ennui*: Rereading Edgeworth's Cross-Writing

Mitzi Myers

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### Canonical "Orphans" and Critical *Ennui*: Rereading Edgeworth's Cross-Writing

*Mitzi Myers (bio)*

Jane Austen demonstrably learned much from the Anglo-Irish author Maria Edgeworth (1768-1849) and highly praises her predecessor's tales in both *Northanger Abbey* and personal letters, but Edgeworth would never have given a novel-aspiring niece Austen's advice: "You are but *now* coming to the heart & beauty of your book; till the heroine grows up, the fun must be imperfect" (Le Faye 275).<sup>1</sup> Far from it: Edgeworth revels in children, and they figure prominently in all her work, often playing pivotal roles in stories marketed primarily for adult readers. But, as this volume's introduction notes, it is not just the traffic between child and adult inside and outside her tales that identifies Edgeworth as a cross-writer, for she negotiates numerous borders—national, historical, and generic, as well as generational. She enjoys literary crossdressing as a male narrator in addition to cross-writing for hybrid audiences, and virtually everything she produced is highly intertextual with literary, cultural, and Revolutionary political history, as well as with the events of her own life.

The 1989 French Revolution bicentenary witnessed an extraordinary outpouring of scholarship and criticism, significantly challenging and revising our thinking about the meaning of that event for literary, historical, and cultural studies. Far more than the American Revolution, the French Revolution has provided the model for what we think of as revolution. Issues of gender surfaced repeatedly in this body of revisionary scholarship, often in troubling ways. It has been argued, for example, that French Revolutionary rhetoric quickly contained and erased the universalistic implications of citizenship—that it relegated women to a "private" and domestic sphere of noncitizenship and thus underwrote the binary opposition of public and private that still organizes our thinking about men, women, and social life.

The approaching bicentenary of the 1798 Irish Rising is unlikely to receive anything like the scholarly attention lavished on French [End Page 116] events, although it will certainly be commemorated and debated. Because Irish historiography, like Irish studies in general, remains unusually masculinist and adultist, it is unlikely that even heated discussions among historians and literary critics will devote much

attention to issues of war and gender in representing and interpreting the "year of the French" invasion. Women's and children's wartime experiences have elicited little scholarly attention until very recently, yet in civil turmoil there is no boundary between battlefield and home front. Even more than in most internal strife, Irish women of all classes and ages had a strong sense of war's realities, not just in 1798, but also in the years that produced and succeeded that traumatic summer. The disciplinary measure of "free quarters," for example, meant that women would be intimately involved with soldiers stationed in or pillaging from their homes; they saw the house burnings and torture that led to the outbreak, and they wrote about the politics that produced those measures in letters and journals.

Women lived with the war's results as well, extending their significant social commentary into the decades following 1798, during which Ireland was effectively governed by martial law. The "protected" domestic space of family homes was fortified like a military outpost for many of those years, yet the patriarchal tradition that women have nothing to say on war persists, rendering invisible what women did say. Political, social, and literary histories typically erase women's war and peace work because they limit what counts as "war" to combat experience and political decision-making alone. Because the 1798 Rising so quickly became a site of masculine mythology and romantic martyrology, women's participation in and representations of 1798 have scarcely been noticed, yet women (and children), as both early accounts and more recent histories emphasize, were everywhere present. They traveled with the insurgents, they often fought, many died by fire or pike, quite a few were raped or robbed, many witnessed murder and searing brutality, hundreds grieved, and a good number wrote personal accounts—some factual, some fictionalized.

The best known and probably the first woman writer to consider the events of the 1798 Irish Rebellion and the politics of the decades...

## *Cannibal "Orphans" and Critical Emilia: Rerendering Edgeworth's Cross-Writing*

Mitzi Myers

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