

War Correspondence: Maria Edgeworth and the En-Gendering of Revolution, Rebellion, and Union.

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

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“Everything...was connected with the Revolution in France; which, for above 20 years, was, or was made, the all in all... literally everything, was soaked in this one event.”

— Henry Cockburn¹

“Tell Sneyd [a young half brother] that there is a political print just come out, of a woman, meant for Hibernia, dressed in orange and green, and holding a pistol in her hand to oppose the Union.”

— Maria Edgeworth, 2 April 1799²

“What has a woman to do with politics, Mrs. Dangle?”

— Richard Brinsley Sheridan³

The epigraphs imply the thorny questions this essay addresses. How does the 1798 rebellion, Ireland’s failed revolution, relate to the Enlightenment thought driving the successful revolutions that shaped the modern world?⁴ How does what we conventionally think of as history get encoded in literary forms? How do we understand the verbal and visual representations produced in troubled times *as* war writing, especially those that appear at first glance inapposite or off the topic? Do women do politics, and if they do, how do their poetics and politics of representation differ from those of their male cohorts? I shall suggest some answers from an examination of *Whim for Whim* by the Anglo-Irish writer Maria Edgeworth (1768–1849), a hitherto unpublished play written and performed immediately after the rebellion, which abounds in allusions visual and verbal, literary and political, personal and public.⁵ The allusions make a case for archival sleuthing and richer contextualization; and the consequences of those actions argue that scholars must resist premature closure of what counts as rebellion narrative and who serves as a war correspondent, and imply that including women undoes conventional historical as well as literary categories, making imperative alternative taxonomies and explanatory models.⁶ However exhilarating, the commemorative scholarship revitalizing the reputations of the

United Irishmen and Theobald Wolfe Tone is not exhaustive. Precisely because history matters so much in Ireland, because the past is so entangled with present politics, because it is so important to get the facts straight, bicentenary scholarship most often delves deepest into who did what and when and where they did it, thus sidestepping the issues of form and representation that alternately energize and demoralize recent historiographic and narrative theory.⁷

Attentive to the hows of telling as much as to what gets told, Dangle, Sheridan's eponymous Critic, is metarepresentationally sophisticated yet gender-blind, acutely **[End Page 74]** commenting on the political theatrics of the play-within-the-play, yet never registering his wife's interest in threatened invasion or Puff's female characters as "to do with politics." Indeed, the playwright himself stows Queen Elizabeth in the green room all night: but, explains Puff, "she is to be talked of for ever; so that egad you'll think a hundred times that she is on the point of coming in." Dangle's dismissal of newspapers crammed with war writing in favor of deflationary commentary on the "theatrical politics" that really matter blurs boundaries between the surreal and the mundane, between parodic drama inside the playhouse and real-world politics in the external theater of war.⁸ Luridly spectacularized by De Loutherbrough, Puff's play, *The Spanish Armada*, demythologizes England's heroic history. Much recent scholarly Irish historiography likewise displaces the high Romantic mythologies of the past, not with parody, of course, but with painstaking archival investigation and reconstruction; much popular Irish history now recognizes its conventionalized status as myth, romance, fable, or folk tale.⁹ However divergent their agendas, many European and American historical practitioners currently reject older notions of an objective, unified "metanarrative" for localized studies, for what they frankly call stories, small and idiosyncratic but "also powerful forms of telling histories that matter." Postmodernists and postcolonialists thus theorize what Sheridan's actors show, through expanding definitions of evidence in response to expanding definitions of history, through foregrounding linguistic maneuvers and symbolic performance as active cultural work, and through uncovering the fictions

in history and the histories in fiction. ¹⁰

Especially useful in understanding women writers as political practitioners who deploy gender-inflected language and forms of representation is the...



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