EGENOLF, SUSAN B.

THE ART OF POLITICAL FICTION IN HAMILTON, EDGEWORTH, AND OWENSON

(Ashgate, 2009). ix+209pp.

Reviewed by Fiona Price

This book sets out to explore the political engagement and artistic skill of three Romantic period women novelists – Elizabeth Hamilton, Maria Edgeworth and Sydney Owenson (Lady Morgan). Edgeworth and Owenson are of course often considered together because of their participation in the genre of the national tale (although their positions on Ireland are quite different), but here the addition of Hamilton allows suggestive contrasts and similarities in the three writers' treatment of the colonial subject to emerge. This treatment is, in each case, Egenolf argues, disrupted by the use of the "gloss," a comment on the original text that, while ostensibly existing to reinforce or clarify, also frequently produces a tension that demands reinterpretation. For Egenolf, such significant paratexts include not only prefaces, preliminary discourses, chapter titles, epigraphs and footnotes but also examples of ekphrasis (such as Owenson's allusions to the work of Salvator Rosa or Edgeworth's invocation of portraiture). The great strength of this approach is that it allows a greater sense to emerge of the often turbulent context in which these writers were working. Egenolf's technique is to link such glosses to related contemporary discourses (including, for example, writing around the 1798 Irish Rebellion). The result is some contextually informed, extremely illuminating close reading.

The skill with which Egenolf examines the gloss is very evident in her discussion of Elizabeth Hamilton's *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* (1796). A great deal of the criticism on this novel, by, amongst others, Kelly, Grogan and Mellor, explores the work as a comparative critique of

Indian as well as British culture. By examining the preliminary dissertation Egenolf shows how Hamilton responds to the writings of members of the Asiatic Society. As Kate Teltscher argued in *India Inscribed* (1995), their works were rarely neutral in relation to the activities of the East India Company. In dedicating her work to Warren Hastings, Hamilton follows translators including her brother Charles and Nathaniel Brassey Halhed. This decision suggests disagreement with Whig politicians including Burke, Sheridan and Philip Francis, but also distinguishes Hamilton from more radical novelists including Charlotte Smith (in *Ethelinde* [1789], for instance, Smith presents the activities of the British in India as inglorious exploitation). In contrast, as Egenolf notes, Hamilton is at pains to suggest the importance of "commerce," "traffic" and "exchange," not of wealth, but of knowledge (20). Hamilton herself is part of this exchange, conscious of an all too common "ignorance, and apathetic indifference" to "the affairs of the East" (one recalls Willoughby's mocking suggestion in *Sense and Sensibility* [1811] that Brandon's observations on the East Indies may only have extended to nabobs and palanquins) (29). Setting out to correct such impoverished accounts, Hamilton participates, not in a "feminized form of culture and politics" (as Gary Kelly argues) but in a "masculine colonial adventure" (26). However, as Egenolf's comparison of Hamilton's novel with travel writing on India reveals, the gender politics of the narrative are complex: the woman author, participating in a masculinized genre, also allows her (traditionally feminized) colonial subject to wield the gaze usually reserved for the colonizer.

For Egenolf, the "self-conscious constructedness" of the oppressed subject is also revealed through the tension between gloss and narrative in the work of Maria Edgeworth. Although Richard Lovell Edgeworth reports that King George greeted the publication of *Castle Rackrent* (1800) with considerable enthusiasm ("he rubbed his hands &said what what – I know something now of my Irish subjects"), Egenolf finds this reading of humorous Irishness undercut when the novel is positioned alongside the "many published accounts relating the horrors of the 1798 rebellion" (45, 44). Maria Edgeworth's discussion of the "great-coat" and her footnote and glossary entry on "fairy-mounts," for instance, are linked by Egenolf to Thady's potential involvement in subversive

political activity (57, 62-5). Likewise, citing Edgeworth's allusion to Spenser's *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (1596) and contemporary letter and journal references to the political significance of "Brownies," Egenolf shows how Edgeworth exposes the anxiety of the Anglo-Irish about their colonized subjects (63). Performing what Egenolf terms "linguistic blackface" as Thady, while equally masquerading as authoritative male editor, Edgeworth, like Hamilton, uses the tension between narrative and gloss to destabilize the meanings of her text (72).

Masks, generic experimentation, and intertitles (or chapter titles) are of course equally evident in Maria Edgeworth's English novel *Belinda* (1801), and here the shift from verbal to iconic glosses, Egenolf argues, has a similarly destabilizing effect, this time in the context of female identity. What she explores here is Edgeworth's sense of the dangers inherent for women in the visual roles offered them. It is not only in such instances as the generically unstable portrait or 'fancy piece' of Virginia that such dangers lie, but also in the conversation piece. While Belinda praises Westal's painting of Lady Anne Percival and her family because it represents "real" "happiness," Egenolf gives a more sceptical reading, reminding us that this too is a "construct" (99). After all, she argues, the main narrative contradicts this visual gloss: when Anne offers Belinda advice, she is proved wrong. Thus, instead of the final triumph of Lady Anne Percival's version of femininity, at the end of the novel Lady Delacour remains dominant – "the disruptive feminine force still survives in the form of the witty story-teller" who presents us with a riddle, in the guise of a moral – "Our tale contains a moral; and, no doubt,/ You all have wit enough to find it out," Lady Delacour says (102). This is a riddle that Egenolf's reading helps us to solve. When Egenolf highlights the novel's use of static tableau and the differing acts of interpretation they invoke, she responds to an implicit invitation in the text. Throughout her oeuvre, Edgeworth suggests that trusting another's subjective viewpoint is dangerous (even when that viewpoint is provided by someone as well-intentioned as Lady Anne Percival). The implication is that Edgeworth's empowered female readers should not need to rely on a conveniently-supplied instruction but should be able to use their independent judgement. The moral is thus at once proffered and withheld.

Moving back to the colonial context, Egenolf continues her emphasis on the visual gloss by examining Owenson's use of the language of the picturesque and of landscape appreciation in *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806). While the wildness of Ireland (like the Indian ruins discussed in Chapter One) might encourage a mixture of nostalgic admiration and complacency in the British reader, Egenolf highlights a more complex agenda. Here Owenson's use of Salvator Rosa is particularly relevant, creating a "subversive aesthetic subtext", a subtext which, I would argue, can also be traced in Owenson's later novels, particularly *O'Donnel* (1814). While Ireland is given the sublimity of other, more prestigious European destinations, Owenson, Egenolf rightly insists, is attentive to specific local economic conditions and to the potentially subversive figures in the landscape that the discourses of art criticism frequently elided.

Perhaps more politically problematic to modern sensibilities is Hamilton's *Cottagers of Glenburnie* (1808), Egenolf's next choice of text. Like Owenson, Hamilton uses the language of the picturesque to mark Mrs Mason's arrival at the village of Glenburnie, but here the tension between the picturesque landscape and the lives and work patterns of the cottagers reflects Hamilton's emphasis on improvement. While Hamilton's intentions are undoubtedly benign (and while she stresses the importance of working class agency), this novel reads uneasily in a colonial context because of its concern with civilising the lower orders. Egenolf is aware of this tension and of the novel's wider political agenda. As she quite rightly points out, the glosses suggest the national context of this educational plan of reform. Hamilton aims to correct the "Domestic Rebellion;" in this reading, it seems that rather than making political reform essential to the health of the nation, she seeks to end a housekeeper's nightmare. Capturing the humour of Hamilton's original (with its "squashy pool" and hairy butter), Egenolf's wider contextualisation of *The Cottagers of Glenburnie* in relation to other projects of improvement makes fascinating reading (130). For Egenolf, moreover, Hamilton's attempts are justified because her novel "does not simply suggest social reform but is instrumental in effecting that reform" (154). Both Hamilton and her fictional protagonist, Mrs Mason, prove the importance of female agency, though in a rather different (more

prosaic) way from either Glorvina (heroine of *The Wild Irish Girl*) or from the fashionable Lady Delacour.

In her final chapter, (as the chronological arrangement of this book dictates), Egenolf shifts her focus back to Sydney Owenson, Lady Morgan. Owenson's *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys: A National tale* (1827) proves, like all her novels, a particularly rich source for the gloss-hunter, and Egenolf once again elicits the constructed nature of national identity. Here too her painstaking investigation of a range of textual devices, including Owenson's allusions to Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1516), Isaac Bickerstaff's *The Sultan* (1775) and John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), proves illuminating. Egenolf argues that Owenson uses the gloss to deconstruct the notion of the national hero of romance and to stress female agency instead.

Egenolf's achievement in this study is considerable. In her chosen texts, she has painstakingly unpacked glosses that have often proved challenging obstacles to critics and general readers alike. In order to do so, she makes excellent use of contemporary sources. Here her approach is frequently entertaining, occasionally startling (as with the brutal extract from Charles Jackson's account of the Irish Rebellion at the start of the *Castle Rackrent* chapter) but, most importantly, persistently illuminating. While Egenolf remains attentive to the differences between these authors, her examination of their use of the gloss reveals some suggestive continuities: narratives of female empowerment strongly emerge in all three writers' use of paratexts, for instance, and this perhaps has implications for their often nuanced (but arguably more problematised) portrayal of colonial subjects. In both contexts, similar tactics emerge: the restructuring of the gaze and acts of literary ventriloquism both serve to question how authority is generated and maintained. Such devices draw attention to national (and class and gender) identity as both construction and performance. However, the nature of the gloss is in some ways problematic; since gloss and text generate tension often through incompatibility or difference, ambiguity sometimes remains even after the act of interpretation has taken place. When unpacking the wider implications of such ambiguity, Egenolf is understandably cautious. However, her broad

conclusions concerning the sophistication of the techniques involved and their political importance are certainly accurate. The generic complexity of the ‘novel of ideas’ prevalent in the post-French Revolution debate has generated considerable scholarly interest. Egenolf’s work represents a valuable contribution to this investigation and will prove particularly useful to students and scholars of Romantic women’s writing, post-colonialism and the national tale.

Fiona Price is Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Chichester