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ALLEGORICAL MARRIAGES IN SELECT WORKS OF SYDNEY OWENSON AND CHARLES MATURIN

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The paper looks at the allegorical use of intercultural marriage in Irish literature following the 1801 Act of Union, with a specific focus on Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl* and Maturin's *The Milesian Chief*. It examines how these national tale novels mirror the Anglo-Irish relationship, employing marriage as an allegory of political and cultural amalgamation. Navigating through historical context, literary techniques, and the depiction of Irish identity, the analysis attempts to illustrate how these works express the intricacies of Irish society in the early nineteenth century.

Key words: Sydney Owenson, Charles Maturin, Ireland, Irish, national tale, allegory, marriage, Act of Union, Anglo-Irish

In 1800, the British and the Irish Parliament passed the Act of Union, which, in 1801, merged the Kingdom of Ireland and the Kingdom of Great Britain to create the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Contemporary documents provide evidence to suggest that the passage of the Act in the Irish Parliament was achieved through bribery, namely by awarding members of the aristocracy and by presenting honours to critics in order to obtain their votes. This key event in Anglo-Irish history was the culmination of a series of events and movements that reshaped the political landscape of Ireland in the late eighteenth century. Initially, the Volunteer movement, beginning in 1778, was a response to external threats and England's preoccupation with the American colonies. It quickly evolved into a broader movement advocating for 'free trade' and political freedoms, including the rights of Catholics and Irish culture and language. Henry Grattan, a prominent figure in this movement, played a crucial role in securing an independent Irish Parliament in 1782. This Parliament, along with the Volunteer movement, laid the groundwork for the Society of United Irishmen. Under Theobald Wolfe Tone, this society sought to

unite Irishmen and Irishwomen of all religions and advocated for the repeal of the Penal Laws, marking a significant shift towards Irish Republicanism and nationalism. This era saw the merging of traditional Irish Jacobitism with the revolutionary Jacobinism of France.

The radicalisation of the United Irishmen, especially after England's declaration of war on France, and their subsequent outlawing and shift to clandestine operations, set the stage for the 1798 rebellion. The rebellion, despite its failure, significantly altered the political climate, leading the British government to push for the Act of Union. This Act worked towards its only objective: to effectively dissolve the Irish Parliament and to gradually obliterate any form of Irishness, thus bringing Ireland under the legislative control of Great Britain. Thus, the Act of Union was not just a political manoeuvre but a response to the growing and diverse calls for Irish sovereignty, unity, and nationalism that had been fermenting throughout the late eighteenth century.

These historical events had an impact on the images of the Irish in historical writing. The passage of the Act was characterised by rhetoric likening it to an intercultural marriage, with Britain portrayed as the groom and Ireland as the bride. This depiction suggests that the Union bore a striking resemblance to the typical features of a traditional marriage contract, a theme that found allegorical representation in the literature of the period. Many writers of the period and thereafter employed the technique of intercultural marriage as an allegory, initially expressed in the national tale and later extended to historical narratives as a means to depict the integration of different cultures as well as to explore the prospects of the hoped-for reconciliation between two nations. Its reoccurring as a component to various novelistic sub-genres "demonstrates the rich experimentation and intertextual borrowings that happened in nineteenth-century Ireland as writers struggled to create narrative forms that could articulate the chaos and confusion of nineteenth-century Irish society" (Matthews-Kane 2005: 13-14).

This paper delves into the marriage as portrayed in *The Wild Irish Girl* and *The Milesian Chief* examining how these novels not only epitomise the union between Anglo and Irish characters but also allegorise the broader Anglo-Irish relationship and attempt to correct on-going anti-Irish stereotypes. Through textual analysis built upon theoretical framework from influential Irish-literature scholars, the present paper hopes to offer new perspectives into the discourse concerning national characters in the aftermath of the 1801 Act of Union, a crucial period in Anglo-Irish history.

In the early nineteenth century, Irish and Scottish national tale novels became a popular medium for writers to address political and social issues. A reoccurring literary device, the allegorical marriage was frequently employed to portray a romance between an Irish/Scottish and an Anglo character, thus representing the intricate relationship between Ireland/Scotland and Britain. Although the main story revolved around themes of love and affection, the authors often communicated ambivalent ideas that either underscore or critique the colonial conventions with regard to Ireland or Scotland. It is this ambivalence in the narrative approach that enables the allegory of marriage to simultaneously heal and expose the scars of the empire, rendering the motif effectively in a colonial context. Furthermore, the interpretations of these allegorical romances found in the novels in focus illustrate how these ostensibly innocent tales are, in fact, politically-charged. This is particularly evident given that the underlying theme of both plots implies that marriage could be a resolution of colonial problems. In this line of thinking, Anne Fogarty rightly observes that "marriages which act as tentative signs of political resolution […] prove simultaneously to be highly ambiguous renderings of the union between Ireland and England which they in part mirror" (Fogarty 1997: 117).

Looking at the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Irish poetry, it is fair to assume that a precursor of romantic allegory is the *Aisling*, a genre of Irish political poetry that flourished in this day. As Patrick O'Donnell remarks:

> One of the most successful poetic means of preserving Irish nationality from the incursions of the colonial hostile culture was achieved in the *Aisling* (dream vision poem) in which a slumbering male poet is enchanted by a *spéirbhean* (sky woman) – a personification of an affronted Ireland – a political allegory employed with greater and greater emotional force from the seventeenth to the eighteenth centuries following the collapse of the ancient Gaelic cultural and political order.[1]

Notably, this form imparts substantial depth to allegorical themes in Irish literature and cultivates an audience attuned to particular literary patterns. In *The Wild Irish Girl*, Sydney Owenson blends Gothic and epistolary styles to communicate concerns about the proposed amalgamation of England and Ireland. To depict the internal divisions and conflicted allegiances within Irish society, Charles Maturin builds characters fuelled

[1] For further detail, read the entire article available at https://celticjunction.org/cjac/arts-review/issue-12-lughnasa-2020/a-history-of-irish-literature-1155-1800/

with ambivalence and duality in *The Milesian Chief*. With the use of allegory framed as romance, the authors aimed to put colonialism into more acceptable terms so that the readers could obtain a better understanding of the Irish identity which was subject to criticism and prejudices in the post-Union period.

Much of the critical scholarship leads us to the assumption that to dispel the misconceptions of Irishness, the authors of *The Wild Irish Girl* and *The Milesian Chief* draw on the myth of Ireland's Gaelic origins.[2] Written in years following Ireland's parliamentary amalgamation with England, these novels seek to provide a lineage for a distinct Irish identity during a historical period when that identity seemed to be disappearing. Therefore, the authors opt to address anti-Irish prejudices in a manner that simultaneously confirms and overturns the prevalent biases existing before, during, and after the eighteenth century. In undertaking this approach, Owenson and Maturin make use of widespread national stereotypes, ones that their readers would have been acquainted with, as a strategy to lead the readers towards an analytical framework that highlights the ideas of "accurate" and "misguided" perceptions.

Furthermore, the Romantic period coincided with an era when the Celts started to gain their modern-day charm. Literary figures portrayed them as forgotten peoples, renowned for their military and magical exploits in a distant, timeless past. This leads us to another important fact that should not be overlooked. During the 1800s, as philology emerged as both a novel and important scholarly field, the focus of Celtic studies shifted predominantly towards a philological approach. Prior to this, key studies were undertaken on the origin of the Irish and, in a broader context, the origin of the Celts. The primary focus was on ethnology through historical lens due to the speculations surrounding the early history of the Celtic people. Irish Franciscan scholars were particularly active in this field. By the 1620s, Hugh Ward and Patrick Fleming, who would later be joined by John Colgan, were delving into the sources for the *Lives of Irish Saints*. With the publication these findings, they aimed to establish an image of Ireland as a Christian nation that had made substantial contributions to Christianity in Western Europe over many centuries. This stance contrasts

[2] In the Introduction to the 2008 edition of *The Wild Irish Girl*, Kathryn Kirkpatrick concludes that *The Wild Irish Girl* is a novel about origins. She says, "Written in the decade following Ireland's parliamentary union with England, Sydney Owenson's book seeks to provide a genealogy for a separate Irish identity at a historical moment when that identity seemed lost" (vii). For the same reasons, *The Milesian Chief* could also be viewed as a novel about origins since it centres around a Milesian character.

with English propaganda, which dedicated considerable effort to foster a negative perception of Irishness, depicting its representatives as savage, primitive, and uncivilized.[3]

Charles Vallancey, a British army officer and military engineer, was another prominent figure that expressed keen interest in the Celtic past. In her article concerning Georgi Rakovski's and Charles Vallancey's philological perceptions of the Bulgarians and the Irish, Ludmila Kostova stresses how "[Vallancey] contributed to the development of the history of ideas in Europe by participating in the creation of a new conception of man of the people that many generations of philologists and folklorists after him would use in their studies: the uneducated representatives of the people, alien to the achievements of civilization, were no longer conceived of as 'savage' and inadequate but as individuals with an instinctive sense of the depths and layers of the culture of an ethnic group and hence of all humanity" (Kostova 2010: 458). Indeed, Vallancey's fascination with Ireland's ancient language and his efforts to study and preserve it were integral to his wider aim of defending Irish civilization against the aspersions of British propaganda. His work in this area was significant and contributed to the cultural and scholarly preservation of Gaelic antiquity. Undoubtedly, these advancements in philology had no small part in the emergence of the national tale sub-genre. Without doubt, authors like Owenson and Maturin, known for their keen interest in antiquarianism and often described by scholars as literary archaeologists, have been well-acquainted with these scholarly contributions.

Provided that the novels in focus are not purely romances but categorised as national tales, it is necessary to spare a few comments on this sub-genre. Broadly, the national tale novels have explicitly public and political orientation as they remain primarily concerned with the insecure union between Great Britian and Ireland. It is also important to note that within the backdrop of Ireland's integration into England, this sub-genre was particularly provocative. Writing about Ireland at that time, especially with themes that could inspire nationalist sentiments, was a considerable risk. In this regard, both novels represented a form of challenge to the existing power. In its essence, the Irish national tale, introduced to the reading public by Maria Edgeworth and Sydney Owenson, remained concerned with the securing of the insecure union between Britian and Ireland. In their influential

[3] See McBride, Ian *Chapter 67: A spark of Hibernicism*, In: *Eighteenth-Century Ireland (New Gill History of Ireland 4): The Isle of Slaves - The Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland.* Gill Books, 2009.

scholarship, Mary Jane Corbett, Katie Trumpener and Claire Connolly have paid special attention to the essence of this genre and its key characteristic, that is, the employment of marriage as an allegory of the Union. This genre, as Claire Connolly remarks, is defined by works of fiction that "took Ireland as their topic and setting, which often imagined […] history via marriage plots that addressed wider issues of dispossession and inheritance, and whose narratives incorporated footnotes and extra-fictional material as spaces of cultural mediation. […] Shaped by a desire to explain Ireland, the national tale joins with antiquarian and polemical histories, travel books, parliamentary speeches and reports, and studies of folklore in their efforts to make sense of the matter of Ireland" (Connolly, 2011: 1-2). In *Bardic Nationalism*, Trumpener defines it as a female-authored sub-genre that has three main hallmarks: "the journey, the marriage, and the national character" (Trumpener 1997: 142). The journey involves a trip to the Celtic peripheries, notably Ireland and Scotland, where the traveller, usually jaded and bored by his or her own metropolitan culture, meets a native informant who introduces the traveller not only to the locale but also to the distinct national character that has sprung from its unique terrain and history. In *Allegories of Union in Irish and English Writing, 1780-1870,* Mary Jane Corbett accentuates the significance of the allegory of the marriage plot to the overall debate surrounding the Anglo-Irish Union as she writes:

> Among the various narrative modes I examine, family plots – narratives of cross-cultural marriage and mixture, as well as those that chart Irish family histories over time and across generations – have an especially important place in English writings about Ireland. Because the familial so often operates as a metonym for the social, a broken or "degenerate" Irish family [which] allegorically signifies the unsettled state of Irish society.
>
> (Corbett 2004: 6)

The Wild Irish Girl is often interpreted in critical scholarship as a tale of national reconciliation achieved through a marriage plot. It centres around Horatio M., a young libertine whose father, an Anglo-Irish aristocrat, seeking to instil a sense of responsibility and scholarly pursuit, sends him to their estate in Connaught, Ireland. There, Horatio meets a noble Catholic family descended from the Milesians. Due to the Cromwellian wars in Ireland, they lost their ancestral lands and now live in impoverished conditions within the dilapidated Castle of Innismore. Arriving in Ireland with a prejudiced mind, viewing the country and its

inhabitants as barbaric and uncivilized, Horatio undergoes an enlightening experience. Through interactions with Princess Glorvina and her father, the Prince of Innismore, he gains an understanding of Irish history, language, and traditions, and in the process, develops a deep affection for Glorvina. Although mutual, this affection seems ill-fated as Glorvina appears to be already engaged to the English landlord who took possession of her lineal lands. This marriage, constructed as a legal contract, would make the landlord the full proprietor of Glorvina's lands and cultural legacy. The marriage allegorises the intermarriage of the Irish and the Anglo-Irish after the Act of Union was signed. Glorvina is to surrender her name and give up her religion by stepping into an unequal relationship. In other words, her Irish identity will be silenced in the same manner the Irish national identity was devoured by the British.

As the novel progresses, we come to the understanding that Glorvina's suitor is Horatio's own father. The revelation of this fact leads to the demise of her father. With the death of the Milesian prince, the daughter is no longer a means for achieving the landlord's goals so he gives his blessing to a marital union between Horatio and Glorvina. As Corbett remarks, in many post-Union novels the marriage plot allegorically suggests the ideological need for altering England's historical relation to Ireland; the hero in *The Wild Irish Girl* himself undergoes a change of character so that he becomes a fit partner for marital union with Glorvina (Corbett 2004: 4). In this outcome, the lands return to their rightful heirs, only to be managed, ironically, by the descendants of Cromwell. In this sense, the marriage represents the conquest of a yielding Ireland with the pen rather than the sword. In an earlier essay, Corbett points out that the novel represses the concept of wildness by portraying a domesticated Irish girl as the source of "the last prescription," which is seen as a narrative violence in itself. The resolution to the rebellion of 1798 is narratively depicted as the willing consent of an Irish bride to an English embrace, raising questions about the power dynamics and the absence of calling it rape in the narrative (Corbett 1998: 101). [4]

[4] Here, Corbett mentions rape as a metaphor for colonialism, a theory formulated by Sara Suleri. This theory describes the portrayal of colonized land as akin to a primitive, feminized geography. Suleri highlights that the metaphor of rape is prevalent in the "anti-imperialist rhetoric" of Indian nationalists like Nehru, who depicted the colonization of the subcontinent as akin to stereotypical sexual aggression. See Suleri, Sara. *The Rhetoric of English India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. p.16 – 17.

Furthermore, this marriage of Horatio and Glorvina is as an emblem of transformation rather than the means, preparing Horatio for the union in a way different from his father's proposal. Through the marriage plot, Owenson delves into the complexities of gendered union, where Horatio is the one who needs redemption and reform, aligning with the narrative's focus on his readiness for the intercultural union. The linking of marital and political union is portrayed as dependent on the character of the groom, emphasising Horatio's aesthetic rather than rebellious nature in conquering Ireland. This approach to allegory accentuates the transformative power of Ireland and highlights the gradual shifting perspective of Horatio from prejudice to a parallel mystification within romance, indicating the radical effects of contact with Ireland (Corbett 1998: 93-94, 96).

Horatio's journey of rediscovering Gaelic Ireland's heritage and culture not only makes him a likable and desirable partner for Glorvina but also signifies a rebirth of Irish identity. His transformed perception of Irishness ensures that this identity will not vanish but will instead be revitalised through the union. As Kathryn Kirkpatrick correctly states, "[b]y marrying Glorvina and Horatio, Owenson dramatically undermines the essentialist definition of Irishness. […] For the emphasis on pedigree that former representation of an Irish national identity is radically challenged by a marriage which will produce children of mixed English and Irish ancestry" (Kirkpatrick 2008: xvi-xvii).

In Maturin's third novel, *The Milesian Chief*, published in 1812, the narrative closely aligns with Katie Trumpener's three hallmarks of the national tale as outlined above. The novel features the Montclares, an English family of rank who travel to the west of Connaught, symbolising a journey to the Celtic periphery. Like Horatio Mortimer, Armida Fitzabalan and her sister Ines/Endymion, encounter representatives of the native land, the O'Morven brothers, Connal and Desmond. As grandsons of a Milesian prince, they introduce the transcendent beauty of Gaelic culture and the nobility of the Irish national character to the English sisters. Unlike Owenson in *The Wild Irish Girl*, Maturin presents a reversal in gender representations. With the male protagonist Connal O'Morven, the author envisions the Irish national hero, paralleling the Irish national heroine Glorvina. Connal heroically saves the lives of friends, fellow men, and even enemies. He twice rescues Armida from the brink of death, pulls Mary and her child from the ocean where they had plunged, shows mercy to a traitor. He also sells his horse to provide financial aid to a starving Irish family. His robust and athletic build distinguishes him from his

English counterparts. Like Glorvina, Connal was raised in the wilds of Connaught by his grandparent, a Milesian prince. Connal is an antiquarian, praises the blind harpist Cormac and wears Gaelic dress to demonstrate his origin. In other words, he is a bearer of the Gaelic culture.

As we can see, both novels feature lead characters of Milesian origin. Given this, it is important to include a brief commentary on the term referencing to Irish mythology. In *Eighteenth-Century Ireland,* Ian McBride explores the evolution of the Irish people's historical identity and the impact of that on their political arguments. He points that "the cult of the Milesians had unmistakably patriotic connotations, it entailed neither separatism nor sympathy for the consolidation of a 'brotherhood of affection' between religious denominations".[5] The Milesians ("Sons of Míl") are crucial in Irish mythology, particularly in the Mythological Cycle also known as The Cycle of Gods.[6] They are said to be the final invaders of Ireland, representing the ancestral stock of the Gaels, or the Irish people. According to legend, the Milesians came from Spain, led by the brothers Heber, Ir, and Heremon. After a series of battles and negotiations, they successfully overthrew the Tuatha Dé Danann, the resident gods, to become the rulers of Ireland. This transition marks the end of the dominance of the supernatural in Ireland and the beginning of human sovereignty.[7] The legend of the Milesians is significant as it explains the mythical origin of the Irish people and their claim to Ireland. It symbolises the transition from a land of gods and magic to one of mortal men and historical rule, linking the mythological past with the ancestral history of the Irish.

The Milesian origin bestows upon both Glorvina and Connal a halo of sacredness, lending them supernatural attributes. In this sense, Matthews-Kane rightly remarks:

> [S]uch racial characteristics as Anglo, Milesian and Norman not only designate an "ethnic" difference between the romantic partners but, more importantly, link the different characters to the various ancient aristocrats that have fought for power in Ireland over the preceding

[5] See McBride, Ian *Chapter 67: A Spark of Hibernicism*

[6] Irish mythology is divided into four "Cycles"". Each cycle is set in a different time period and follows a different set of characters. The Mythological Cycle delves into the origins and history of the Irish gods, known as the Tuatha Dé Danann. It is filled with tales of magic, battles with supernatural beings, and the otherworldly events. Central to this cycle is the story of how these gods came to Ireland and their eventual defeat and retreat into the otherworld, paving the way for mortal men.

[7] For further detail, see MacKillop, J. (1998). *Dictionary of Celtic mythology*. Oxford University Press. pp. 292-293

> centuries and to the noble origins and right to rule that come with a certain lineage. While the Anglo characters rule by right of law and power, the Milesian and Norman characters can claim ancestral rights and draw on the intense loyalty between them and the Irish peasantry, a nostalgic allegiance based on shared values, culture and old feudal devotion.
>
> (Matthews-Kane 2005: 7-8)

Armida Fitzalban, the female lead in *The Milesian Chief*, does not quite fit the typical definition of an Anglo-Irish or English heroine as portrayed in earlier allegorical romances. Instead, she represents a broader portrayal of British nobility due to her Italian upbringing. Her father is an English Lord, and her mother descends from an Italian aristocratic family. In the first chapter, the author describes her distinctive personality as follows: "her talents are real but her character is artificial. Nature intended her for a superior being, a genius; but pride, flattery and an ambitious education, have made her mere woman" (Maturin 1812: v1, 5). These features give her personality a "decidedly Continental influence" (Matthews-Kane 2005: 98). Armida's family travels to the west of Ireland after her father secures a deal in purchasing an estate in Connaught. The acquisition of the estate through commercial means, rather than inheritance, implies that Armida and her sister Ines lack long-standing ties to any country, be it Italy or England, which only enhances the hybridity in both characters (Matthews-Kane 2005: 99). Connal appears as an appropriate Celtic counterbalance to the detrimental effects of Continental influences on Armida's character. Like Glorvina, he embodies the Celtic love interest who offsets undesirable qualities in an English character. Glorvina's Celtic nobility serves as the impetus for Horatio's evolution into maturity, ultimately rendering him an appropriate match for a balanced and harmonious marriage.

We have previously discussed the hybrid nature of the characters and noted that both *The Milesian Chief* and *The Wild Irish Girl* are novels centered on the theme of origin. It is essential to consider the extensive degree of kinship among the characters. In *The Milesian Chief* this is a crucial indicator of their hybridity, but this also presents the risk of incest. All of the lead characters appear to be first cousins. The elder sister of Lord Montclare eloped with the son of the ousted Irish family. Her two sons, Connal and Desmond, are not only the love interests of Armida and Endymion/Ines but also their kin. Additionally, Lord Montclare's younger sister's son appears to be Colonel Wandesford, who is engaged to Armida.

The close kinship ties between the characters render their union implausible, as it would be considered highly incestuous. By portraying the merger of Ireland and England in this light, akin to an incestuous affair, the author underscores the catastrophic destiny of Ireland. Desmond and Ines's romance ends tragically, with Ines experiencing the loss of their child and subsequently descending into madness. Furthermore, the theme of incest plays a crucial role in the subplot surrounding the inheritance of the Irish estate. The conflict over the castle symbolises the broader cultural and political disputes surrounding Ireland. The resolution of the inheritance plot, establishing the O'Morven brothers as the legitimate owners, implies that the native Irish aristocracy has been unjustly deprived of its legitimate legacy, thereby acknowledging ongoing debates about colonial power in Ireland (Matthews-Kane 2005:100-101).

Maturin's portrayal of the union between England and Ireland, as depicted through allegorical characters, emerges as deeply conflicted. It is as if the two countries, represented by these characters, are fated to be together yet doomed to fail. Both couples are depicted as deeply and genuinely connected, yet their union is untenable due to its foundation lays on violent past and political machinations. The novel concludes on a tragic note, which underscores the author's pessimistic outlook on Ireland's future in the post-Union era. The dramatic demise of the Gaelic brothers symbolises the forthcoming threat of complete obliteration of Irish identity.

Finally, an ongoing theme is the uprising of the oppressed Irish against the English occupiers, clearly intended to reflect the 1798 Rebellion. This theme is grounded in real, historical, and collective events and carries a sense of hope despite its ultimate failure. In the closing lines of the novel, as Connal and Armida are no longer among the living, as Rosine and St. Austin walk around their grave, we read that "the world to which they are gone brightens in the contrast" (Maturin 1812: v. 4, 203). Further, there is an ash-tree growing near "the spot where the lovers rest together" (Maturin 1812: v. 4, 203), which could be interpreted as a beacon of hope. On a similar note, the marital union between Glorvina and Horatio represents the passing of an older Gaelic culture in Ireland, as the wedding veil is transformed into a funeral shroud, symbolizing the death of her culture (Matthews-Kane 2003: 16) In this novel, the intercultural marriage symbolises hope that the Union will not achieve its objective of eroding Irishness, that the Irish identity will continue to exist only in a new form. Likewise, *The Milesian Chief*, suggests that Irish identity could evolve into a hybrid form, one that still retains a connection to its Gaelic past.

Owenson's and Maturin's visions of Ireland's future, though contrasting, share a common aspiration: the preservation of national culture and traditions. This romantic ideal is vividly and emphatically communicated in their national narratives. The urge on Gaelic Ireland resonates profoundly in *The Wild Irish Girl* and in *The Milesian Chief*, becoming a recurring theme interwoven in the literary tapestry of many nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers and poets.

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