

## **Curating the past: Margins and materiality in Sydney Owenson, Lady Morgan's *The Wild Irish Girl***

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***Abstract:** In nineteenth-century historical fiction, the emphasis on antiquities was often expressed through capacious footnotes and endnotes as a way to personalise the past. I offer the novel by Sydney Owenson, Lady Morgan, *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806) as a case study of this textual phenomenon, reading the ways that Owenson attempts to connect the past with the present upon the page: to contain and represent cultural history. Excavating Owenson's footnotes and their antiquarian curation of her historical fiction allows us to identify and interrogate her larger project of weaving history through fiction by means of antiquarian commentary. Thus, I argue that through the paratextual glosses that have come to characterise the nineteenth-century historical novel, historical fiction holds the potential to become an archive that reshapes (and romances) collected ideological artefacts into a new textual, literary record. Footnotes in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century historical fictions present, document and organise information in order to foster new perspectives and build new ways of imagining the past.*

History is often told through collections and the act of collecting. Sir Walter Scott's 1816 novel *The Antiquary* illustrates this approach to historiography, in its presentation of the eponymous antiquary, Jonathan Oldbuck. Oldbuck is fixated on historical artefacts as a way of pursuing knowledge and coming to terms with the past. The materiality of the book, the physical object of *The Antiquary* itself, is likewise fixated on antiquities and antiquarianism, which are represented through the novel's editorial apparatus of extensive annotations: the many footnotes and endnotes offering scholarly commentary on the people, places, events and objects collected within the narrative. Ten years prior to Scott's critically acclaimed novel of antiquities and historicity, Sydney Owenson (later Lady Morgan, 1776-1859) published *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806), a work that is perhaps the supreme example of the extensive citation of antiquarian works in a historical novel, a practice carried on into the nineteenth century more selectively by Scott as well as fellow Irish novelist Maria Edgeworth. This

valuation of artefacts as a way of bringing ‘the antiquary into a closer contact with those who had inhabited the past’ (Sweet 2004, 28) anticipates later attitudes to historical fiction and to the act of collecting, such as Walter Benjamin’s remarks on the collector’s relationship with artefacts. Benjamin writes that the collector ‘does not emphasize [artefacts’] functional, utilitarian value – that is, their usefulness – but studies and loves them as the scene, the stage, of their fate’ (Benjamin 1968, 60).

Upon turning the pages of *The Wild Irish Girl* the reader cannot help but notice the lengthy footnotes running over most pages of the novel, footnotes that present editorial commentary, complementing the fictional storyline. In all its contemporary printings, the novel is divided horizontally into two sections: the fictional, romance narrative fills the upper, main portion of the page; the footnotes below provide scholarly discourse that sometimes overtakes the boundaries of the lower margin and fills the page. In fact, one single footnote consists of nearly 2,000 words and fills over ten full pages in the text’s original octavo format. Such paratextuality is not uncommon in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century historical novels, as the works of Horace Walpole, Charlotte Smith, Jane Porter and many others attest. The seeming ubiquity of marginal annotations in the genre has prompted critics like Susan Stewart to ask, ‘How does the present appropriate the past? How does our gaze upon the past, even when articulated as a desire to escape mediation, always separate us from the past?’ (Stewart 1991, 68). I use these questions as a foundation for reading the marginal annotations of *The Wild Irish Girl* as a case study in the ability of fiction to appropriate and curate narratives of the past, to contain, define and redefine cultural history. I read *The Wild Irish Girl* as a dialectic between past and present, centre and margin. Owenson, acting as both author and editor of the text, shapes her novel into a rich collection of Irish cultural artefacts set on display in the narrative and curated in the footnotes. These curatorial footnotes provide Owenson’s editorial voice with a platform to oversee the text and to prescribe an interpretation of the narrative: she is able to act as a superintendent or curator of the text, editing the fictional letters that comprise the narrative. The novel’s footnotes provide contextual information for the linguistically mediated antiquities ‘collected’ in the text. Together, the text and paratexts provide a tale that promotes a more complex panorama of the past than either the romance narrative or the notes could portray on their own.

The plot of *The Wild Irish Girl* weaves together generic elements of saccharine romances, epistolary novels, travel narratives, political allegories, antiquarian accounts and history primers. The effect is a novelised dissertation that argues for a reconsideration of the cultural and historical merit of Ireland. The main text consists primarily of Horatio’s letters to a correspondent, J D, and an introductory series of letters between Horatio and his father, along with a brief third-person, non-epistolary conclusion. Horatio’s letters document his travels

through the Irish countryside with anecdotes of ‘the Irish character in all its primeval ferocity’ (Owenson 1806, 17).<sup>1</sup> The novel opens with Horatio’s banishment from England to his father’s estate ‘on the north-west coast of Connaught ... the classic ground of Ireland’ (Owenson 1806, 17). Horatio provides a detailed account of his arrival in Ireland and journey to Inismore, providing an ethnographic account of ‘the tone of national character and manner’ (Owenson 1806, 16). Upon arriving at his father’s Irish estate, Horatio hears of O’Melville, romanticised as the last Prince of Inismore, and his daughter Glorvina, described as being ‘like nothing upon the face of God’s creation but herself’ (Owenson 1806, 40). These living relics of Irish antiquity reside in the ruinous Castle of Inismore situated on land expropriated by Horatio’s family. After one glance at Glorvina, Horatio instantly becomes smitten, and climbs a perilous pinnacle to catch just one more glimpse of her. He falls from the rock and is taken in by the Prince and Glorvina to recover. Horatio is convinced that the Prince and Glorvina would despise him if they knew his identity: he is a descendant of the English landlord class and fears that he would suffer the ‘cold aversion of irreclaimable prejudice’ if they were to discover his family’s role in alienating their hereditary property (Owenson 1806, 53). To forestall this ‘cold aversion’, he calls himself Henry Mortimer and masquerades as a traveling landscape painter, promising to instruct Glorvina in the art during his convalescence. Horatio’s letters soon turn from providing an ethnographic overview to recounting conversations he holds with Glorvina, and he includes summaries of their conversations about poetry, music, fashion, political history and religious history. Over the course of Horatio’s residence in the Castle of Inismore, he falls even more passionately in love with Glorvina, but soon learns that she is intended to marry another man (whom readers will later learn is Horatio’s father). Incensed, Horatio leaves the Castle and returns to the lodge on his father’s estate where he receives a letter announcing that his father will soon be arriving in Dublin along with the father of a woman whom he has arranged will marry Horatio. None of the arranged marriages take place, however, as the sudden *deus ex machina* voice in the conclusion reveals. Instead, Horatio and Glorvina are allowed to marry, successfully resolving a marriage plot that has been the focus of many critical conversations about this novel (see Tracy 1985; Lew 1990; Corbett 1998; Tracy 2004; Dougherty).

While the main narrative would not normally be labelled ‘historical fiction’ in the common sense, Owenson’s novel can arguably be regarded a precursor or an early specimen of the genre if we consider the novel’s 125 intricate editorial footnotes, which are preoccupied with Irish cultural and national history, as part of her novel. Readers are guided through Horatio’s romantic encounter with Ireland and its native inhabitants by these editorial footnotes, one of which is a footnote subjoined to another footnote and includes a citation to an explanation given in a previous footnote. Eighty include direct citations of outside sources;

other notes consist of vocabulary glosses and translations, anecdotes and commentary without identification of specific sources. Similar to the way that Horatio describes Glorvina's storytelling within the narrative, the novel's curator, Owenson, who acts as author and poses also as an editor, likewise punctuates her narrative with a 'thousand delicious comments' that contain, critique and ultimately curate the artefacts that they frame (Owenson 1806, 155).

One way to explain this curation of the past is to read footnotes like these as a textual manifestation of an emphasis on objectivity and classification that emerged from the Enlightenment. Jonathan Kramnick has explained simultaneous romanticising and classification as a merger of the Gothic charm of Britain's past and its obscured continuity with Britain's present. Likewise, Clifford Siskin and William Warner describe this emphasis on particularities of the past as a 'turn toward more specialized and localized knowledges and practices' occurring in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Kramnick 1997, 1087; Siskin and Warner 2010, 26). I read the prolific application of annotation in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century imaginative literatures, particularly in the historical novel, as a manifestation of this turn. I suggest that we interpret the antiquities collected and set on display in *The Wild Irish Girl* as indicative of Owenson's engagement with contemporary historiographical philosophies. Owenson expands antiquarian discourse, a discourse previously confined to works of Irish historians and antiquaries in the 1760s through 1780s, to the realm of novels and fiction (see O'Halloran 2005, 6; Peacocke 2013). Thus, I argue here for reading the antiquarian-inspired historical and national romance *The Wild Irish Girl* as itself an antiquarian catalogue, a systematic record or a cultural genealogy connecting the present with the past.

### Antiquarianism and annotations

The creation of meaning within *The Wild Irish Girl* relies largely upon the efforts of the reader to unite the disparate text and paratexts that give a unique shape and texture to the page. Joe Bray, Miriam Handley, and Anne C Henry suggest that 'to mark a text is also to make it [...] features such as punctuation, footnotes, epigraphs, white space and marginalia, marks that traditionally have been ignored in literary criticism, can be examined for their contribution to a text's meaning' (Bray et al 2000, xvii). Therefore, to give primacy to the margins of the novel and the paratexts that mark the page is to unearth the meaning offered by the text-plus-paratext. In unearthing this meaning, the reader must also distinguish between Owenson's editorial voice, her authorial presence and her creation of character. Owenson juxtaposes her own critical voice with the narrative voice of her fictional Horatio to underscore her argument for Ireland's cultural prowess. She draws upon a conventional model of critical, academic writing alongside the mode of fictional romance by her prolific use of footnotes. By looking to broader trends of historiography in the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries, especially as these appear within the framework of historical fiction and national romance, we can gain a better idea of how to interpret the multi-textual, layered narrative that Owenson weaves in *The Wild Irish Girl*. This interpretation, in turn, allows us to understand more fully the ways this book is not only a product of epistemological trends, but also a contribution to the varied landscape of antiquarian literary productions.

Popular and literary antiquarianism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries can be broadly defined by its focus on the local and the particular to create a tangible narrative of the past. Distinct from the abstract philosophies of lofty and learned historians, antiquarians focus on the concrete, material aspects of social and cultural history (Woolf 2000, 3-12; Sweet 2004, 5). The antiquarian moves past the macro-level historiography of geological, geographical and political narratives to a micro-level history: the particular places and people associated with the artefacts collected which held an 'evocative power to conjure up images of bygone eras. The tangible physicality of the object offered a sensory point of contact with the past, which no amount of descriptive eloquence could replicate' (Sweet 2004, 27). This localisation makes history something specific and tangible, 'a physical contact with the past, transcending the passage of time' (Sweet 2004, 33). This specificity is often represented in marginal annotations in antiquarian historiographies, the nineteenth-century historical novel and the historical fictions ushering in the genre, like *The Wild Irish Girl*.

As textual indications of antiquarianism, footnotes in historical fiction represent an undeniable expression of desire for historicity and locality, contextualising and romanticising the artefacts (Mayer 1999; Saglia 1999). These paratexts thoroughly problematise the ways we commonly perceive the role and voice of the author. With paratexts, the role of the author becomes inextricable from those of editor and reader as well. Paratexts gain this multiplicity through what Gérard Genette regards as their 'discursive nature', echoing Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of hybrid discourse; that is, the interplay between the author and text, text and reader, author and reader and the compositional process enacted in this discourse (Genette 1997, 332; Bakhtin 1981). Shari Benstock suggests that 'the footnote in fiction operates in much the same way as it does in criticism: to call attention to the presence of author and reader on textual grounds' (Benstock 1983, 206). Likewise, Lawrence Lipking states that the existence – even simply the possibility – of glosses and footnotes 'demonstrates that the space surrounding print is not a vacuum but a plenum' (Lipking 1977, 613). This plenum is made evident in the ways that notes 'call out' and '[render] more exact' the meaning of the literary text, as David Simpson writes of annotated poetry, 'while at the same time the main text is implicitly found wanting, in need of further explication. Something more needs to be said, but it appears in small print, as if not fully belonging [...] and yet somehow pertinent' (Simpson 2012, 109). That is, the paratexts provide context, exacting the meaning of an imperfect text; in their material manifestation, these contextualising frames are both

part of and apart from the main text, relegated to the margins and often set in fine print. The result of this location in and dislocation from the text, as both Genette and Simpson have observed, is a liminal space; and it is in this liminality (the margins, which are included in the novel yet not wholly part of it) where Owenson's account of Ireland, as a part of Britain yet not wholly included, is told most clearly.

Several critics of *The Wild Irish Girl* nod to the annotations and acknowledge their significance within the novel's underlying plot of social and political criticism (Tessone 2002, 169, 175; Jylkka 2011, 84-5; Connolly 2000, lvii). Susan B. Egenolf describes these notes as an ekphrastic gloss that ultimately commands the romance narrative: 'Horatio's naïve first-person narrative is enveloped by the learned glosses of the editor' (Egenolf 2009, 106). These glosses, according to Jane Stevenson, provide a 'heady and intricate blend of the historical and the fantastic' (Stevenson 1995, 196). They are, as Joep Leerssen heralds them, 'part of [the book's] maverick charm' and 'a textual shadow zone' that shifts the interest of the text to an 'interest in Ireland itself rather than in the girl who metonymically personifies it' (Leerssen 1989, 102). Ina Ferris, in turn, reads Owenson's annotations as the means through which the fictitious editor of the letters can authenticate the culture and history of Ireland, while others have examined the ideological and material connections of marginality (page and nation) and read Owenson's footnotes as a site of marginalised expression and as a representation of invasion and union, both textually and politically, humanising her scholarship (Ferris 1991, 126; Ferris 1996, 291; see also Watson 2012, 8, 49-50; Douglass 2011; and Zerby 2002, 9). In concert with these critics, I read Owenson's national romance and notes together as 'simultaneous narratives', as Egenolf describes them; these narratives are not about Ireland itself, as Leerssen suggests, but 'about other texts about Ireland' (Egenolf 2009, 106; Leerssen 1996, 60). Building from these assessments of Owenson's annotations, I read the notes themselves to consider their contribution both to the novel itself and to the wider genre of historical fiction. I suggest that Owenson's footnotes achieve an antiquarian-like curation of the myriad artefacts – material and immaterial – set on display within the narrative of romance and history. The marks of antiquarian history that these notes impart on the novel hold singular importance for the ways we read and interpret *The Wild Irish Girl* as well as how we might read the wider genre of historical fiction emerging in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Owenson presents readers with a rich collection of Irish antiquities set on display in the narrative and curated in the notes. In her presentation of this collection, she draws upon the techniques of description of those antiquarian treatises from which she referenced in composing her footnotes, including Sylvester O'Halloran's *An Introduction to the Study of the History and Antiquities of Ireland* (1772), volume four of Charles Vallancey's six-volume *Collectanea de*

*rebus Hibernicis* (1770-1804; Vol. 4 1784), and Joseph Cooper Walker's *Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards* (1786). Together, the linguistically mediated artefacts provide a glimpse into the culture of collection and of Irish antiquities. However, unlike these object-oriented antiquarian histories, Owenson's novel is organised to tell a story. The diachronic narrative and the synchronic paratexts in *The Wild Irish Girl* unite to suggest a contextual or thematic relationship among artefacts on display.

For example, Owenson removes the Irish harp of tenth-century Irish chieftain, Brien Boirohm, from its display in Trinity College Dublin where it was placed in 1782 and places it in the hands of Glorvina. When Glorvina tells Horatio about the musical history of Ireland, Horatio asks if her harp follows the original design of ancient Irish harps. Glorvina replies,

'Not exactly, for I have strung it with gut instead of wire, merely for the gratification of my own ear;\* but it is, however, precisely the same form as that preserved in the Irish university, which belonged to one of the most celebrated of our heroes, Brian Boru; for the warrior and the bard often united in the character of our kings.' (Owenson 1806, 68)

The asterisk in the middle of this passage draws the reader's attention to the page margins where Owenson, as textual curator, provides a verbal description of the Irish harp she sets on display within the novel's narrative. In the note, Owenson draws upon the authority of 'a very eminent modern Irish bard, Mr O'Neil' who describes the Irish harp in greater detail: "My harp has thirty-six strings" (the harp of *Brian Boiromh* had but 28 strings), "of four kinds of wire, increasing in strength from treble to bass; your method of turning yours (by octaves and fifths) is perfectly correct; but a change of keys or half tones, can only be effected by the tuning hammer" (Owenson 1806, 68n, emphasis in the original). This description within the footnote focuses only on the Irish harp and its utility; Owenson, in the narrative, both describes the harp and places it into the context of human use. Thus, in drawing attention to the localised particularities, and, especially in *The Wild Irish Girl*, the material artefacts, Owenson places precedence on personalising national and cultural history.<sup>2</sup>

One crucial site of collecting activity within the novel is Horatio's documentation of the fictional Castle of Inismore, which Horatio even describes as an 'armory, a museum, a cabinet of national antiquities, and national curiosities' (Owenson 1806, 98). This 'emporium of the antiquities of Inismore' has fallen into romantic ruin, 'grand even in desolation, and magnificent in decay' (Owenson 1806, 100, emphasis in the original). He records the 'dilapidated architecture' through his paintings and drawings, thereby exhibiting his own collection of Irish cultural landscapes (Owenson 1806, 45). Here we can see how Horatio himself has modelled his engagement with Ireland as that of a Benjaminian collector, archivist and, most notably, an antiquarian draftsman. At this point in the novel, Horatio's account of the objects (along with Owenson's scattered

footnotes) truly does read more like a descriptive catalogue of the collected martial relics and the various architectural details of the Castle ruins than a romance. Horatio describes the Castle's architecture as follows:

Almost every evening after vespers, we all assemble in a spacious hall,\* which had been shut up for near a century, and first opened by the present prince when he was driven for shelter to his paternal ruins...[the hall] runs the full length of the castle as it now stands (for the centre of the building only, has escaped the dilapidations of time), and its beautifully arched roof is enriched with numerous devices, which mark the spirit of that day in which it was erected. This very curious roof is supported by two rows of pillars of that elegant spiral lightness which characterizes the Gothic order in a certain stage of its progress. The floor is a finely tessellated pavement; and the ample but ungrated hearths which terminate it at either extremity, blaze every evening with the cheering contributions of a neighboring bog. The windows, which are high, narrow, and arched, command on one side a noble view of the ocean, on the other they are boarded up. (Owenson 1806, 98-99)

In this passage, Owenson, via the voice of Horatio, draws careful attention to the appearance of the hall, making note of the grandeur of the 'paternal ruins' and the Gothic elements of a 'beautifully arched roof', 'rows of pillars', 'tessellated pavement', and 'high, narrow, and arched' windows. Owenson accompanies these spatial descriptions of the ruinous hall with a scholarly footnote which references O'Halloran: "“Amidst the ruins of Buan Ratha, near Limerick, is a princely hall and spacious chambers; the fine stucco in many of which is yet visible, though uninhabitable for near a century” – *O'Halloran's Introduction to the Study of the Hist. and Antiq. of Ireland*, p. 8”" (Owenson 1806, 98n). Through the instructive interruption of the footnote, Owenson prompts readers to periodically pause during the tour of her Irish architecture exhibition. Additionally, when we take up the invitation to consult O'Halloran, it becomes evident how the structural details of this hall that catch Horatio's attention closely mirror the details provided in the illustrations and descriptions of ancient Irish architecture in O'Halloran's work.

This attention to and reverence for Irish history is rhetorically similar to the projects of the Irish antiquaries that Owenson relies upon in curating her collection, in penning her novel. Through the voice of Horatio and through her editorial persona, Owenson underscores the political agenda of her work. Her views echo those of her antiquarian model, Sylvester O'Halloran:

So blindly and wilfully [*sic*] prejudiced have modern writers concerning Ireland been, that our very maritime cities, in which the lofty towers, strong walls, and elegant buildings, bespeak the power as well as taste of the antient Irish, are all attributed to the Danes—a savage, barbarous crew, whose interruptions like those of their successors the Saxons, were every where marked with blood, rapine, and desolation! We every where



read of countries laid waste, people as well as buildings destroyed by these barbarians, but not a word of improvements, whilst the evidences of foreign, as well as domestic antient writers, are clearly in our favour. (Owenson 1806, 86-87)

As may be expected, the lexis in O'Halloran's passage is remarkably similar to that of Owenson – the purposeful reversal of perspective, painting the English as equally odious as they had painted the Irish – demonstrates their shared opinions on the devaluation of Irish history. Like O'Halloran, Owenson does not shy away from calling out the destructive effects of neglecting Irish culture and history and even begins to incorporate an urgency into her own commentary in her footnotes. Moreover, in referencing O'Halloran in a footnote, Owenson invites the reader to consider the case for political urgency implicit in the romance narrative and explicit in the footnotes.

### Reconstructing the historical narrative

For Owenson, footnotes are more than markers of historiography, in the tradition of Edward Gibbon (or of satire, in the poetic tradition of Alexander Pope). Her footnotes, rather, literally underscore and historicise her fiction. The footnotes provide Owenson with a platform for reconstructing and disrupting the historical narrative. The antiquarian documentation offers a rhetorical strategy for calling attention to moments and artefacts, 'momentarily alter[ing] the narrative' (Owenson 1806, 16n). Owenson engages in marginal annotation as a means through which to express her doubts as well as her convictions, while also providing objective documentation to support her narrative of Irish history. She uses the tool of the footnote to take advantage of the opportunity to politicise, with surprising sharpness, Ireland's colonial past. In this editorialising commentary, Owenson attempts to redeem and revalue Irish cultural artefacts. Anthony Grafton writes that 'the text persuades, the notes prove', yet in Owenson's manipulation of the margins, the notes also problematise Anglo-centric historiographies (Grafton 1999, 15).

To reconstruct these narratives, she references thirty specific authors and a wide array of titles, ranging from antiquarian histories to treatises on Irish politics, to travel narratives, to bardic poetry. The result of this complex constellation of information is a multi-layered work of fiction, scholarship and critical analysis that reconstructs the narrative of Irish history. As may be expected given her pro-Hibernian stance, Owenson's textual network is comprised largely of Irish historians and poets, including, among others, *The Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy* (1787), Charlotte Brooks's *Reliques of Irish Poetry* (1789), Edmund Burke's *Reflection on the Revolution in France* (1790) and *Letter on the Penal Laws against the Irish Catholics* (1782), Oliver Goldsmith's 'The Deserted Village' (1770), Charles Smith's *The Ancient and Present State of the County of Kerry* (1774) and *The Ancient and Present State of the County*

*and City of Cork* (1790) and William Parnell's *An Enquiry into the Causes of Popular Discontents in Ireland* (1805). When read alongside the fictional narrative of the central text, Owenson's footnotes present a distinct trajectory; the narrative and the notes work to similar but distinct ends. They begin by succinctly glossing references to cultural practices or phrases of Anglo-Irish vernacular but sharply veer away from the primary narrative with lengthier, anecdotal and essayistic commentary. They mark the fiction with the textual trappings of more conventional historiography but disrupt the trance of the romance narrative by providing a site for blatant social commentary and critique of Anglo-centric historiographical practices.

The inter-textual footnotes seek to tell a rich story in concert with the fictional romance. The admiration for Ireland is omnipresent in the fictional narrative and the footnotes alike. Indeed, the critical commentary in the margins – critical in both a scholarly and an ideological sense – is even more overt in its argument against English prejudice towards Irish culture and history than the narrative of the main text. The trajectory of the footnotes' content moves from a focus on ethnography to history to literary anecdotes and finally to politics, each conveyed with an increasing urgency and with fewer but lengthier quotations. The footnotes steadily sever themselves from the main text and introduce a new layer to Owenson's argument, one less directly connected with the text, but one with the same aim of collecting relics of Irish history. Although Owenson lowers her editorial voice by framing her commentary as footnotes to the larger work, this voice conveys as much vigour as the main text itself. The subordination of the footnote to the main text allows for a subtle integration of Owenson's argument, disembodied from the speakers in the novel; meanwhile, these subordinate footnotes exact control over the reading experience, should the reader choose to engage in them.

The notes begin by providing an ethnographic description of northwest Ireland, verbally painting the Irish cultural landscape alongside Horatio's own drawings described in the fictional narrative. In addition to providing her own first-hand knowledge of Irish culture, Owenson draws upon travelogues and memoirs as her outside sources for many of her ethnographic annotations. On Irish hospitality, Owenson comments, '\* "Every unprejudiced traveller who visits them (the Irish), will be as much pleased with their cheerfulness as obliged by their hospitality; and will find them a brave, polite, and liberal people". - Philosophical Survey through Ireland by Mr. Young' (Owenson 1806, 16n). On traditional dress, she writes '\* This manner of wearing the coat, so general among the peasantry, is deemed by the natives of the county of Galway a remnant of the Spanish modes' (Owenson 1806, 23n). She further comments on traditional dress by calling attention to legwear: '\* They are called "triathians". —Thus in a curious dissertation on an ancient marble statue, of a bag-piper, by Signor Canonico Orazio Maccari, of Corona, he notices, "Nudi sono i piedi ma

due rozze calighe pastorali cuoprone le gambe” (Owenson 1806, 23n). (Owenson does not provide a gloss for the Italian phrase, but it roughly translates to being ‘barefoot but wearing crude, pastoral leggings reaching to the calf of the leg’.) Owenson’s ethnographical notes seek to challenge misconceptions of a savage, uncultivated Ireland by pointing to ‘refined’ Spanish fashion and showcasing her own erudition by appropriately quoting in Italian.

Next, the notes turn to a discussion of historiographic portrayals of Ireland, implicitly arguing for revaluing of Irish cultural history by disavowing pervasive stereotypes. Owenson provides ethnographic information drawn from historical and antiquarian sources to temper assumptions of intemperance among the Irish while introducing the notion of established rules of civility among the ancient Irish militia. She writes that “\* The temperance of an Irish peasant in this respect is almost incredible ... One of the rules observed by the Finian land, or ancient militia of Ireland, was to eat but once in the twenty-four hours. —See Keating’s History of Ireland’ (Owenson 1806, 24-25n). Owenson continually undermines commonplace prejudices against the Irish. Steadily becoming less detached from her scholarly narrative, she challenges readers to reconsider commonly held opinions of the Irish people and to accord Irish history the reverence it deserves:

\*It has been the fashion to throw an odium on the modern Irish, by undermining the basis of their ancient history, and vilifying their ancient national character. If an historian professes to have acquired his information from the records of the country, whose history he writes, his accounts are generally admitted as authentic, as the commentaries of Garcilorsso [*sic*] de Vega are considered as the chief pillars of Peruvian history, though avowed by their authorship to have been compiled from the old national ballads of the country; yet the old writers of Ireland, (the psalter of Cashel in particular) though they refer to those ancient records of their country, authenticated by existing manners and existing habits, are plunged into the oblivion of contemptuous neglect, or read, only to be discredited. (Owenson 1806, 169n)

Owenson argues that the biased histories that ‘throw an odium on the modern Irish’ must be reconsidered – Irish history is exceedingly complex and should be recognised as such. While arguing this, she simultaneously places Irish history into a larger world history of colonisation and cultural appropriation. The Spanish empire in South America at this time was regarded as a sort of symbol of bad colonising (greedy, brutal, Catholics, and so on) and used to illustrate the comparative civilisation of British imperialism (much as the Belgian Congo would be employed later in the century as an example of uncivilised colonisation) (Elliott 2006, xvii-xviii). Thus in comparing the colonised Irish to the Inca, Owenson is making quite a provocative statement. She points out the double standard that acknowledges oral traditional materials from other nations (such as from Peru) as credible but that discredits and even casts contempt upon Irish

oral tradition as historical source material. The passage she selects implies a desire to instill sympathy for the native Irish akin to that felt for the oppressed Incas. Owenson's marginal commentary invites historians and novel readers alike to put an end to this prejudiced practice.

Next, Owenson turns to traditional Irish oral materials in her footnotes as part of her historical project and critical argument, to rectify what she perceives as an injustice to Irish oral history. Here, she develops her efforts to validate Irish history and identity through poetical sources and literary anecdotes, in addition to the ethnographic sources. In these footnotes containing literary anecdotes, Owenson draws upon Thomas Percy, Charlotte Brooke, James Macpherson and Oliver Goldsmith along with a few lines of traditional ballads and references to ancient poems. For example, in a lengthy footnote regarding the history and high status of minstrelsy across Britain but particularly in Ireland, Owenson quotes the traditional ballad 'King Estmere' from Percy's *Reliques*:

And you shall be a harper's brother,  
Out of the north countrye,  
And I'll be your boy so fine of sighte,  
And bear your harp by your knee.  
And thus they renesht them to ryde  
On two good Renish steedes,  
And when they came to King Adland's hall  
Of red gold shone their weedes. (Owenson 1806, 69n)

Along with this poetic interjection, Owenson turns to an English source for legitimating information regarding the status of the Irish culture of minstrelsy:

Dr Percy justly observes, that in this ballad, the character of the old minstrels (those successors to the bards) is placed in a very respectable light; for that 'here we see one of them represented mounted on a fine horse, accompanied with an attendant to bear his harp, etc. etc.' And I believe in Ireland only, is the minstrel of remote antiquity justly represented in the itinerant bard of modern days. (Owenson 1806, 69n)

She deftly lends an Irish focus to the English source, pointing out the role and status of minstrelsy still maintained 'in Ireland only'. In highlighting the Irish continuation of a vocation previously practiced also in England but now defunct, Owenson highlights a continuity with the past that Ireland has been able to maintain, but which England has lost. Here, she voices what Joep Leerssen has referred to as the 'literary-political formula that Ireland is a country tragically caught between its past and present, its dreams and its realities' (Leerssen 1991, 284), and also what Katie Trumpener has noted as a nationalist desire for a future based on reparations of the past: 'a future in which a history of cultural achievements was at once honored, preserved, and rejoined' (Trumpener 1997,

30). Thus, by coupling antiquarianism's particularity and utility with an idealisation of the past, Owenson offers hope for an idyllic future Ireland through her vision of chronological unity wrapped up within the role of the minstrel.

Maintaining her focus on Irish literary history, Owenson incorporates the opinions of Irish poet Charlotte Brooke for further support of the poetic merit of Irish literature as a way to portray a coveted culture, quoting from Brooke's *Reliques of Irish Poetry*: '\*...“Tis scarcely possible that any language can be more adapted to lyric poetry than the Irish; so great is the smoothness and harmony of its numbers: it is also possessed of a refined delicacy, a descriptive power, and an exquisite tender simplicity of expression”' (Owenson 1806, 42n). This return to poetic history and clear romanticising of poetic values and structures of the past is a demonstration of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's contemporary theory of language development, wherein he asserts during the 'golden age' or 'barbaric times' that 'at first only poetry was spoken' (Rousseau 1781, 33, 12). Through Brooke's assessment of poetic language, Owenson attempts to show the historical continuity that Ireland has maintained, unlike England's poetic history and progression.

Finally, Owenson's argument in the footnotes progresses into politics and social criticism. She provides a pointed critique of English prejudices against Irish culture and identity; she rallies against the unfair welfare policies enacted for Irish citizens and tenants of Anglo-Irish landholders. For this part of her argument, she draws heavily on Edmund Burke's political reflections and William Parnell's impassioned *Enquiry into the Causes of Popular Discontents in Ireland* (1805), which had been just published the previous year.

Not all of Owenson's footnotes follow the trajectory outlined here. In some notes espousing social criticism, she eschews documentation and uses the notes instead to present her own reasoned but passionate argument on politics, history, and literature alike. She relies upon her pathos alone without any secondary sources in stating her case for the 'once oppressed, but ever unsubdued spirit' of the Irish population (Owenson 1806, 172n). The most poignant portion of Owenson's argument and engagement of herself as the scholarly authority on Irish politics appears in Letter XXV in a very lengthy footnote. Over the course of this 750-word footnote, Owenson first states her goal of 'effac[ing] from the Irish character the odium of cruelty; by which the venom of prejudiced aversion has polluted its surface' (Owenson 1806, 171n). She then critiques British colonialism, comparing British invasions and accompanying histories to Spanish colonisation of the Americas and their histories:

Had the Historiographer of Montezuma or Altaliba defended the resistance of his countrymen, or recorded the woes from whence it sprang, though his quipas was bathed in their blood, or embued [*sic*] with their

tears, he would have unavailingly recorded them; for the victorious Spaniard was insensible to the woes he had created, and called the resistance it gave birth to cruelty. (Owenson 1806, 171n)

The footnote continues in this feverish and passionate tone, juxtaposing Spanish and British colonialism in a most poignant – even damning – comparison. For, as John Huxtable Elliott states, ‘if Spain in the sixteenth century had furnished the model [of colonialism] to be followed, now [...] it was the model to be shunned’ (Elliott 2006, 220-21). Owenson likewise shuns the British model of ‘commercial enterprise, Protestantism and liberty’ which was ‘enshrined as the mutually reinforcing constituents of a national ethos’ (Elliott 2006, 220-21) in British colonisation efforts in Ireland and across the globe. Here, Owenson appears to abandon her scholarly persona and to speak instead as an impassioned Irish patriot. No longer do the notes merely ‘enable the reader to work backward from the established argument to the texts it rests on’, as print historian Anthony Grafton suggests (Grafton 1999, 30). Rather, the footnotes of personal reflection and cultural commentary provide a paratextual platform for criticism that is related to the text in theme, but not in content. The various marginal critiques, such as this one, provide us with moments of pause where the narrative’s spell is broken and where we are able to more thoroughly reflect upon the offered information and opinion rather than be swept up entirely into Horatio’s and Glorvina’s blossoming romance.

In this lengthy note, Owenson presents a history of British affiliations with Ireland prior to the 1800 Act of Union which promised to restore equality: ‘here may be found a remnant of an ancient British Colony, more pure and unmixed, than in any other part of the world. And here were committed those barbarities, which have recently attached the epithet of cruel to the name of Irishman!’ (Owenson 1806, 172n). She calls the reader’s attention to ‘ancient Irish independence’ with a record entirely clean of bloodshed (without documentation) (Owenson 1806 172n). Here, her argument becomes increasingly impassioned as she reflects upon the injustice she sees enacted upon her native land and the people therein. This note, one of several with a similar argumentative tone, refuses to submit to Benstock’s assessment of footnotes in fiction as belonging ‘to a fictional universe’ and stemming ‘from a creative act rather than a critical one, and direct themselves toward the fiction and never toward an external construct, even when they cite “real” works in the world outside particular fiction’ (Benstock 1983, 205). Rather, in her curatorial role as mock-editor, Owenson has taken the reader on a journey from traditional, antiquarian footnoting to a political paratext of critical commentary in the course of the novel. This final annotation stands as the apex of the journey with its partisan Burke-esque essay style with a markedly different rhetoric from her earlier antiquarian descriptions.

Owenson's argument in the annotations becomes most developed in this footnote. It is not a note where she mentions herself or 'the author'. It is not a note where she provides woolly quotations, citations of secondary sources, or visual descriptions of dress, artefacts or events. Instead, it is a note where Owenson lets her voice speak loudly for itself and command a generous portion of the page, spanning over five pages in the original octavo format. The curatorial voice of the paratext is entirely divorced from the narrative voice of the text. The note offers a strategic emotional appeal – presumably reflecting Owenson's personal stance – and emphasises what Benstock describes as 'the interplay between author and subject, text and reader, that is always at work in fiction, giving us occasion to speculate on self-reflective narration as an aspect of textual authority' (Benstock 1983, 205). This fiery footnote is one of the final annotations Owenson provides in the novel. Thus, we may even read this lengthy footnote dedicated to debunking the myth of Irish depravity as the crux of Owenson's argument for Irish equality, presented in the trappings of antiquarian historiography.

### Conclusion

In a letter written to Owenson while she was composing *The Wild Irish Girl*, Irish historian and antiquarian Joseph Cooper Walker offered his assistance regarding matters of Irish antiquities and folklore. He recommended that she 'collect some of [the Finian tales], and, perhaps, interweave them with the work on which you are at present employed. If you could obtain faithful descriptions of some of the scenes of those tales, you would heighten the interest of your romance by occasionally introducing them'. Walker further suggested that Owenson imitate 'the prose romance of the Irish, which was, I believe, generally interspersed with poetical pieces'. He then suggests that she review Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) for some examples, and to secure an audience with the 109-year-old 'Bard of the Maygelligans' to gather 'many anecdotes of the Bards of the North during the last century' (Walker 1863, 261-63). It is evident that Walker's unsolicited advice exercised considerable influence over the textual form of *The Wild Irish Girl*. Not only does Owenson cite passages of poetry from Percy's *Reliques* and provide the recommended account of the Bard of the Magilligans; she also takes to heart Walker's stylistic suggestion of drawing upon 'the prose romance of the Irish', densely interspersing her own modern romance with the 'faithful descriptions of some of those scenes' and the 'poetical pieces' Walker calls for; she also sets her narrative in the same northwest region of Ireland where many of the Finian Tales are set. Owenson also moves beyond imitating the style of established narrative forms and integrates the novel's defining feature – the footnotes.

Excavating Owenson's footnotes and their antiquarian curation of her historically inflected fiction allows us to identify and interrogate her larger project

of reclaiming and celebrating Irish primitivism as a means of establishing a sympathetic unity of Ireland's textual fragments and cultural ruins. Accordingly, the logic of the antiquarian's or collectors' elevation of fragments and ruins to treasures provides a useful framework through which to read the relics entextualised and curated in Owenson's footnotes. Thus, through the marginal annotation that has come to characterise both Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl* and its generic cousin, the nineteenth-century historical novel, historical fiction holds the potential to become an archive that reshapes (and romances) collected artefacts into a new textual, literary record. The footnotes that mark the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century generic precursors to the historical novel present, document, and organise information in order to foster new perspectives and build new ways of imagining the past.



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- 1 All subsequent citations of the novel and its notes are drawn from this edition and are included parenthetically in the text.
- 2 Owenson's attention to history as personal, lived experience is indicative of early nineteenth-century philosophies of the past. Writing contemporaneously with Owenson, William Godwin notes the distinction between political and personal – national and local, abstract and particular – histories in his posthumously published essay 'Of History and Romance':

The study of history divides itself into two principal branches; the study of mankind in a mass, of the progress, the fluctuations, the interests and the vices of society; and the study of the individual. The history of a nation might be written in the first of the senses, entirely in terms of abstraction, and without descending so much as to name one of those individuals of which the nation is composed. (Godwin 1794, 359)

Thus, despite the easy dismissal of the antiquarian as eccentric, this form of history emphasised the distinction Georg Lukács later drew between the Great and the Common Man: 'what matters therefore in the historical novel is not the re-telling of great historical events, but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in these events' (Lukács 1937, 42).