Examining Glorvina as Hibernia: the Gendered Implications of *The Wild Irish Girl*

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Abstract

Owenson’s *The Wild Irish Girl* perpetuates a literary history that figures Ireland as dependent. In her novel, the two main characters, Horatio and Glorvina, represent their respective countries, England and Ireland, as an allegory for the Act of Union. To analyze Owenson’s novel, I argue that the writing of Jonathan Swift establishes a literary tradition which figures Ireland as a dependent woman. Additionally, Thomas Tracy argues in, “The Mild Irish Girl: Domesticating the National Tale,” that the Irish Glorvina is an empowered female who demonstrates agency. Where Tracy fails to understand the gendered implications of the national tale, I argue that the consequences of illustrating Ireland in this way are not just within the pages of the text. Horatio’s privileged gaze reinforces the gendered binary between England/Ireland, male/female, and allows for Glorvina to become idealized and inhuman. Instead of providing a national heroine as Tracy argues, Owenson perpetuates the nations’ unequal relationship.
In John Tenniel’s “The Fenian-Pest,” a 1866 cartoon for *Punch* magazine, a beautiful young woman clings to the muscular arms of another woman while a mob of savage men gathers behind them. Hibernia, the faceless and hyper-feminized woman, says “O my dear sister, what are we to do with these troublesome people?” Britannia, fists clenched, looks toward the crowd sternly and puts her foot down on a banner reading, “Rebellion.” National personifications typically depict countries in the female form using the latin name of the country they represent. Tenniel’s cartoon demonstrates the visual tradition of gendering Ireland as woman in this way, yet the contrast between the two national personifications emphasizes a significant inequality. The viewer can actually see the hyper-masculinized Britannia’s face, her expression fierce, whereas Hibernia’s face looks away, hidden as her gentle and weak frame clings to her sister’s arm. Tenniel’s Hibernia joins the literary tradition of “identifying the feminine as the essence of Irish national character” (Canning 77). At the beginning of the twentieth century, W. B. Yeats creates Cathleen Ni Houlihan, a supernatural and mysterious woman that calls the young men of Ireland to rise. During the eighteenth century, Jonathan Swift illustrates Ireland as the Injured Lady in *Story of the Injured Lady*, and about a century later Sydney Owenson’s national heroine Glorvina symbolizes Ireland in the 1801 Act of Union in *The Wild Irish Girl*. Each of these representations portray a feminized Ireland that relies on the aid of a masculine figure.

In an analysis of the novel, Thomas Tracy’s article, “The Mild Irish Girl: Domesticating the National Tale,” argues for a reading of Glorvina’s character as an empowered representation of Ireland that encourages the equality of the gendered hierarchies between man and woman, and therefore England and Ireland. In making this argument, Tracy ignores the gendered implications of a national heroine and the significance of a literary tradition that figures Ireland as subordinate
to England. Instead, Owenson perpetuates Ireland’s position as subordinate in the relationship to England in a way that demonstrates Ireland’s need and dependency on England, just as the frail Hibernia leans on muscular Britannia in “The Fenian-Pest” to save her from the savage Fenian rebels.

In the literary tradition of figuring Ireland as woman, Jonathan Swift’s *Story of the Injured Lady* and *The Answer to the Injured Lady* establish Ireland as dependent in relationship to England through an illustration of Ireland as female. *Story of the Injured Lady* depicts the political relationship between England and Ireland in a narrative about a failed romantic relationship at the time of the Union between Scotland and England. The Injured Lady’s description of her relationship with the Gentleman, England, demonstrates the thoughts of an unfortunate lover; she makes excuses for herself, “being then young and foolish,” and lists his “hard Usage” of her (Swift 3). The Gentleman’s intentions become clear when she writes to her friend that “when he had once got Possession, he soon began ... to act like a Conquerer” (5). His relationship to the Lady establishes a power structure that renders her subordinate. Once placed in such a role, the Gentleman as England views her as a dependent rather than his equal in marriage.

As he seeks to name England’s crimes against Ireland in *Story of the Injured Lady* and *The Answer*, Swift reveals that Ireland fails to speak for herself. Rick Canning argues in his essay, “‘Ignorant, Illiterate Creatures’: Gender and Colonial Justification in Swift’s *Injured Lady* and *The Answer to the Injured Lady*,” that Swift relies upon the traditional heteronormative binaries of male/female, independent/dependent, and strong/weak. The gendered implications of England’s actions transform the crimes of the nation so that it becomes an “enemy of ... feminine
virtue itself” which “call[s] forth a heightened indignation” (Canning 80). Although Swift appears to be blaming England for such crimes, Canning argues that “Swift saw in Ireland not only a long history of subordination and abuse, but also a fundamental inability to care for itself” (86). In *The Answer*, the Injured Lady remains reliant on a male voice to speak for her. Instead of empowering her to overcome her oppression, Swift supplants her voice with his own male voice of reason. His assumption that the “natural role of woman is to submit to man” establishes Ireland as a woman who requires the aid of a superior male figure – the author – and figures the nation as dependent on England and the male voice (81).

Swift’s *Drapier’s Letters* also speak for Ireland in a way that she cannot on her own, and reinforce the tradition of Ireland’s dependency on a male voice. Written under the pseudonym of M.B. Drapier, the *Drapier’s Letters* is a collection of letters to protest William Wood’s coinage of debased copper half-pence in Ireland. Swift projects his own male voice through the Drapier in order to rescue Ireland in his public appeal in seven letters. He argues in the fourth letter, *To the Whole People of Ireland*, that “our Neighbors ... have a strong Contempt ... especially for Ireland: They look upon us as a Sort of Savage Irish,” a concept that harkens back to Spenser’s *A View of the State of Ireland* (64). The Drapier uses this frame to shape his argument against Wood, but ultimately he exposes Ireland’s subordinate position to England, and sets apart the two nations. In his third letter, *To the Nobility and Gentry of the Kingdom of Ireland*, Swift critiques the relationship between the Irish and the English under the Dependency Act:

It ought to have been expressed what our *Liberties* and *Privileges* are; and whether we have any at all; for in specifying the Word Ireland, instead of saying
his Majesty’s Subjects, it would seem to insinuate, that we are not upon the same Foot with our Fellow-Subjects in England. (39)

The Drapier emphasizes the nation’s inequality as subjects to the crown under the Dependency Act, and “that Ireland’s dependency upon England gave the country the status of a mere colony in English eyes” (Hammond 129).1 Swift’s depiction of Ireland in the Drapier’s Letters shares the qualities of his illustration of Ireland as the Injured Lady. In both, Swift reinforces Ireland as unequal to England. In this same strain of subordinate character, the gendered implications of how Ireland is represented in Swift’s writing becomes imperative in understanding how Ireland, when depicted in the form of a woman, cannot be an empowered body.

Swift figures Ireland as subordinate in both The Drapier’s Letters and Story of the Injured Lady, and effectively illustrates Ireland in two feminized roles, as mother and lover. In his fifth letter, the Drapier raises his voice for the speechless and defenseless Ireland, which figures Ireland into a new form of dependent woman:

It is a known Story of the Dumb Boy, whose Tongue forced a Passage for Speech by the Horror of seeing a Dagger at his Father’s Throat. This may lessen the Wonder, that a Tradesman hid in Privacy and Silence should cry out when the Life and Being of his Political Mother are attempted before his Face; and by so infamous a Hand. (89)

In the Drapier’s version of the Dumb Boy, he does not cry out for a political father, but a defenseless mother. In her book Swift’s Landscapes, Carole Fabricant calls attention to the gendered implications of Swift’s writing. She analyzes Swift’s patriotism as a means to condemn

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1 In 1719, the Dependency of Ireland on Great Britain Act declared the Kingdom of Ireland as subject to the British crown and Parliament, and was repealed in 1782, just before the Union of England and Ireland in 1801.
a form of political or national matricide. Additionally, Fabricant argues that for Swift, this form of political matricide, to not speak up or fight for one’s country, is the gravest of sins, that “matricide becomes for Swift a dramatic emblem of all those unforgivable sins of ingratitude and betrayal committed by men” (229-230). Thus in Fabricant’s analysis, the Drapier raises his voice for a political mother not to stand by her side, but to stand for her. Swift thus figures Ireland in two different female personas: the mother and the lover. Both women desperately need a male voice, to fight for her, to speak for her, or to take care of her.

Jonathan Swift raises his male voice for a feminized Ireland that cannot speak for herself, and Sydney Owenson continues this tradition. Kathryn Kirkpatrick argues that *The Wild Irish Girl*, “provide[s] a genealogy for a separate Irish identity at a historical moment when that identity seemed lost” (vii). As an allegory for the Act of Union, Owenson’s novel provides a national identity as the Union responds to the 1798 rebellion and dismantles the Irish Parliament.² Yet it would seem that by representing Ireland through Glorvina as a national heroine, Owenson continues the tradition of figuring the nation as dependent. Since “national tales are the earliest Irish novels centrally concerned with definitions and descriptions of Ireland,” I would argue that a definition of Ireland, defined within gendered boundaries, allows readers to apply social binaries not only to the text, but to the nation itself (Burgess 39).

Owenson’s Anglo-Irish identity provides a complicated answer for a nation lacking an identity of its own. Her mythologized birth on the Irish sea to an English Protestant mother and

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² R. F. Foster describes in *Modern Ireland* that “the subsequent step of a constitutional union between Ireland and England seems a logical consequence of the 1798 rebellion: a structural answer to the Irish problem, with ... expectations that an infusion of English manners would moderate sectarianism” (282). *The Wild Irish Girl* appeals to the sentiments of the rebellion, as Miller writes in “Acts of Union,” that “although small in scale, the United Irishmen’s rebellion of 1798 led by Theobald Wolfe Tone was notable because it was the first time middle-class Protestants had successfully aligned with impoverished Catholic tenantry against British rule in Ireland” (Miller 14). As an Anglo-Irish writer, Owenson’s national tale responds to matters of national concern.
an Irish Catholic Father “allowed her to construct and perform an identity” (Kirkpatrick viii). Through this performance, she “became adept at crossing boundaries,” and “embraced her Irish Catholic father’s country and culture” (ix, viii). This constructed and performed Celtic and Anglo-Irish identity becomes something that Owenson uses to her advantage “in her ... career [as] she was always between two currents, in hereditary traits, in religion, and in politics” (Campbell 17). Her own performed and constructed national identity complicates Ireland’s in *The Wild Irish Girl*. As the allegory of the Union, the nations are represented through a marriage that would embrace English culture and ownership. In her essay, “Isn’t it your own country?”: The Stranger in Nineteenth-Century Irish Literature,” Melissa Fegan argues that since Owenson “literally forged her own national identity,” it seems odd that “for her heroine Glorvina, Irishness is identified only with those of Gaelic or Celtic origin.... She paradoxically advocates the destruction of this Gaelic world in the assimilation of English and Irish” (39). Although I agree with Fegan, she only focuses on a national identity and does not critique the gendered implications of the novel. Owenson’s national tale transforms a travel narrative that celebrates Irish culture into a national identity which embraces a governing English (male) body. Glorvina becomes trapped, no longer wild and Irish, but English and a wife dependent on Horatio to take care of her and her father’s land. It becomes difficult to discern between the fantasy and the reality in *The Wild Irish Girl*, which begs the question if Gaelic Ireland is glorified or punished, and if the reader should root for Horatio and the English Ascendancy?

The life of Owenson’s father, her main influence in understanding her Irish identity, is as contradictory as his daughter while he performs and perpetuates Irish stereotypes on stage for a living. Owenson’s father “was the source of all [Sydney’s] Irishness, and most of her
contradictions:” he married an English Protestant wife, anglicized his name, and simultaneously “claimed kinship with the whole thirteen tribes of Galway ... and he could expound the genealogies of them all” (Campbell 17, 22). Yet, Robert Owens, born Robert Mac Owen, was employed as a Stage Irishman, where he “made his name as an actor,” and made a career of performing an Irish stereotype (Kirkpatrick x). The Stage Irishman is a stereotype of the Irish employed on the English stage, “reduced in British characterizations to a subhuman figure ... [and] to the English public the peasant incarnated the barbarism and savagery of Irish rural life, becoming an emblem of the Irish national character itself” (Hirsch 1119). Biographical anecdotes from Sydney Owenson’s life like these complicate an understanding of an Irish national identity, and raise questions about stereotypes within _The Wild Irish Girl._

Since Edmund Spenser’s _A View of the State of Ireland_, the Irish have been depicted as the barbaric, savage racial other to the civilized English. Spenser’s writing depicts Ireland as savage and dangerous. Through a gendered reading, Joanne Craig argues in “Monstrous Regiment: Spenser’s Ireland and Spenser’s Queen,” that Spenser is threatened by the Irish because they challenge gender binaries. Spenser describes the Irish women as masculine, and critiques the Irish mantle, a type of clothing worn by both the women and men. According to modern criticism, Owenson “sought to make the stereotypes more positive” as she faces these traditional interpretations of the Irish national character (Kirkpatrick vii, xiv). However, if the lack of a binary system makes Ireland threatening, Owenson’s allegory could then be read as the reestablishment of a gendered system: Horatio, English and male, Glorvina, Irish and female. In restoring “order” to Ireland, _The Wild Irish Girl_ reinstates traditional gender binaries, and renders

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3 Craig argues that the “accursedly confusing garment sustains alike the irascible and concupiscible passions, masculine and feminine excess,” and by symbolizing the androgyny of Ireland, it lacks reason in a binary system as it is simultaneously male and female, and worthy of both anger and desire (5).
Glorvina and Ireland the weaker sex, just as Jonathan Swift renders the Injured Lady as dependent on a male voice of reason.

Thomas Tracy optimistically represents Glorvina as an empowered woman with agency rather than perpetuating a tradition. Tracy selects The Wild Irish Girl and Maria Edgeworth’s The Absentee to enter a dialogue on the hopes for the Act of Union in 1801 to create a harmonious relationship between the two nations. He contrasts Owenson’s novel to The Aeneid and the Henriad, and suggests that Owenson overturns literary tradition when Horatio, seduced by Glorvina, chooses to stay in Ireland, rather than flee, and reject the role of the absentee landlord. He argues that Glorvina demonstrates “increased equality both between Britain and Ireland and between women and men,” and that she is “far from being subservient,” yet he fails to recognize the gendered implications of her character (Tracy 20). Furthermore, he reduces Swift’s Injured Lady to a footnote and ignores a literary history that perpetuates Ireland’s subordinate position.

Particularly in comparison to Story of the Injured Lady, Tracy’s representation of Glorvina appears extraordinarily optimistic when he argues that “the most significant aspect of the allegorical Glorvina’s character is her embodiment of a progressive, activist, and most tellingly, public character” (20). He chooses to emphasize Glorvina’s Catholicism, her education, and Horatio’s infatuation as a way to promote equality between the two nations, but in doing so he overlooks problematic areas of the text. Tracy’s argument ignores the significance of figuring Ireland as a woman, trapped within a patriarchal system of power that privileges the English just as the narrative privileges Horatio’s point of view.

The footnote where Tracy references Swift’s Injured Lady refers to the aisling, a supernatural female figure that symbolizes Ireland in literature and folklore, and utilizes his
illustration of a female Ireland to explain the supernatural woman. As he reduces Swift to the margins, he fails to acknowledge the similarities between the Injured Lady and Glorvina. This ignores the possibility that Glorvina herself resembles the “mythologized female” (26). In many ways, Hibernia, the Injured Lady, and Glorvina all function as aislings as they symbolize Ireland in an idealized feminine form, and each rely on the strength of a male or hyper-masculine character. Tracy argues that “Owenson’s idealized transformation extends to, indeed hinges upon, the realm of gender relations” (19), and that “Owenson’s re-imagining of traditional gender relationships represents a radical overturning of the social order,” but it is exactly the importance of how the allegory of the Union is gendered that perpetuates the social order (25). As a supernatural representation of Ireland in the female body, the aisling relies on traditional gender binaries. Whereas Tracy would argue Owenson challenges gender norms in order to illustrate Glorvina and allegorically Ireland as empowered, I argue that these gendered implications perpetuate a historical and cultural depiction of Ireland as subordinate to England.

These gendered and national hierarchies found within the narrative of the novel disturb Tracy’s vision of equality. The Wild Irish Girl privileges the voice of its English male narrator as a travel narrative, and in effect, represents Ireland through English eyes. In travel narratives, the English narrators’ “nationality, status, and otherness gave an authenticity and power to their statements that the authentic Irish could not achieve” (Fegan 35). Horatio is privileged for his male voice and nationality. Language within Horatio’s narrative, as well as the descriptions of Glorvina, perpetuate the literary tradition that figures Ireland as a dependent woman. In these examples from Horatio’s narrative, Glorvina becomes silenced, objectified and framed in female spaces, and idealized as an inhuman, feminine figure. These examples further demonstrate the
gendered implications of Glorvina’s character as disempowered and subordinate to the English voice and agency of Horatio.

Glorvina’s silence indicates a literal lack of voice and agency, and conveys compliance in her relationship with Horatio. There are a number of instances where Glorvina responds to Horatio with silence. Her lack of voice provides an empty space to be filled by a male voice, not unlike *Story of the Injured Lady* or *The Drapier’s Letters*. One example of Glorvina’s silence that indicates a lack of agency occurs in a moment of romantic gesture. Glorvina gives Horatio a rose, a symbol of England, which he returns with a “branch of myrtle,” symbolizing love and marriage:

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I plucked off a small branch of that myrtle which here grows wild, and which, like my rose, was dripping in dew, and putting it into the hand I still held said, ‘This offering is indeed less beautiful, less fragrant, than that which you have made; but remember, it is also less fragile -- for the sentiment of which it is an emblem, carries with it an eternity of duration.’ Glorvina took it in silence, and placed it in her bosom; and in silence we walked together towards the castle.
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(Ownenson 141-142)

His gesture and emphasis implies his desire for a union. The repetition of the phase “in silence” also emphasizes her response. Instead of providing a remark that would demonstrate a desire for independence her silent response denotes compliance. Glorvina never exclaims her feelings towards Horatio in words. Her gestures and actions are also ambiguous, and never directly convey consent. Horatio assumes his feelings are returned, and writes to his friend, “besides, she never said she loved me. Said! — God of heavens! were words then necessary for such an
avowal?” (216). He supplants her silenced voice with his own. Horatio’s belief that Glorvina’s consent is not required emphasizes England’s role as an imperial conqueror. This assumption continues into the Epilogue, in which no one asks Glorvina whether or not she wishes to wed Horatio. She becomes objectified in her silence, and passed off from one man to another. In this way, the narrative turns Glorvina into a silent object. Her own female Irish voice becomes supplanted by a male English voice, which emphasizes an unequal relationship between the two gendered nations.

Glorvina fails to demonstrate agency in her silence only to become visually objectified as the object of Horatio’s gaze. During Horatio’s visits to Inismore, Glorvina’s father, the Prince of Inismore, and Father John attempt to educate Horatio on the history and culture of Ireland. During these conversations Horatio could receive an education on Hibernia, but instead he focuses his attention on the idealized female embodiment of Hibernia before him. He writes in one such conversation, “I shake my head, look very wise, and appear to listen, while my eyes are rivetted on Glorvina” (161). Horatio ignores the opportunity to learn more about Ireland, emphasizing an English lack of interest in the concerns of Ireland, and focuses on rendering Glorvina and Ireland as an object of his gaze.

This objectifying male gaze frames Glorvina in traditionally female and domestic spaces. Up until they meet, Horatio only knows about Glorvina from the locals’ stories. When he arrives at Inismore, he sees her for the first time as a voyeur during Mass. Afterwards, Horatio is enchanted by the voice of a woman as he is walking. Through Horatio, we as readers hear Glorvina’s voice for the first time:
For the voice it symphonized; the low wild tremulous voice, which sweetly sighed its soul of melody o’er the harp’s responsive chords, was the voice of a woman! Directed by the witching strain... I climbed, with some difficulty, the ruins of a parapet wall ... when I stood on it, a perfect view of the interior of that apartment to which it belonged ... could I but realize the vivid tints of this enchanting picture, as they then glowed on my fancy! (52-53)

Determined to view what takes his fancy, Horatio climbs the wall and watches Glorvina in her home. He frames her within a domestic space, and simultaneously views her as an enchanting object, a “picture” that pleases his senses. In this first moment of seeing and hearing Glorvina, the reader understands her as a physical object and an enchanting picture. Shortly after he scales the wall, Horatio loses his footing and falls from his desired position. In this moment, Tracy argues that “although Glorvina is here the object of the gaze, Horatio falls from his vantage point on the parapet and requires Glorvina’s medical care to restore him to health in a symbolic leveling of hierarchies” (23). Although he may require her care, her nursing emphasizes a feminine and maternal role. From the reader’s perspective, Horatio hears a beautiful voice, Glorvina becomes an enchanting picture, pleasing to the senses, and then immediately she takes on the role of mother. All of this occurs through Horatio’s view. When Horatio awakens, he discovers Glorvina “at her father’s side ... her trembling hands busily employed in preparing bandages” (53). Later, Glorvina replaces the nurse at her post:

She was seated on the nurse’s little stool. Her elbow resting on her knee, her cheek reclined upon her hand .... Glorvina ... told [the Priest] aloud, that the nurse had entreated her to take her place, while she descended to dinner. ‘And no place
can become thee better, my child ... than that which fixes thee by the couch of suffering and sickness’ (61).

The Priest affirms Glorvina’s role as nurse, and so does Horatio’s description of her as he watches her by his bedside. According to Tracy, Glorvina’s skills as a caretaker allow the gendered hierarchies to become leveled, as if that were all it took to balance out Horatio’s objectifying gaze. In placing her in such a feminine role, the gendered binaries, let alone hierarchies, are reinforced by figuring Glorvina as a picturesque object as well as a maternal caregiver.

After framing her as mother and caregiver, Horatio’s privileged voyeuristic gaze places Glorvina in situations that transform her into a sexual object. In one particular moment, Horatio finds Glorvina’s apartment to be unlocked and unoccupied, and takes the opportunity to investigate her belongings. Horatio invades this private female space, and inspects it as if viewing artifacts in a museum. After he “gratified [his] curiosity,” he decides to lean up against the window, when after some time Glorvina enters:

As I stood concealed by the silken drapery, she did not perceive me.... I stole softly behind her, and my breath disturbing the ringlets which had escaped from the bondage of her bodkin, and seemed to cling to her neck for protection, she turned quickly round, and with a start, a blush, and a smile, said, ‘Ah! so soon here!’ ‘You perceive,’ said I, ‘your immunity was not lost on me! I have been here this half hour!’ ‘Indeed!’ she replied (157).

Again, Horatio frames Glorvina from a private vantage point unbeknownst to her, and from the literal frame of a window. Horatio’s voyeuristic attitude is not merely of a silent nature, but he
disturbs the privacy of Glorvina’s apartment. Even her hair seeks protection from the English conqueror, as Horatio describes his breath “disturbing” her ringlets. Glorvina’s “start, a blush, and a smile” do not seem to be out of excitement, and her response of “Indeed!” appears to be more out of shock and surprise than welcoming. Her blush and reply emphasize embarrassment rather than pleasure. Just as Jonathan Swift manages to figure Ireland as both mother and lover, Horatio’s gaze frames Glorvina in the same way. She becomes the object of his privileged male and English gaze first as a pleasing picture, and then as an object of desire. If Tracy argues that *The Wild Irish Girl* emphasizes an equality between the gendered hierarchies, this scene reinforces that Horatio possesses agency over the female space, and Glorvina herself. In other words, if Horatio can easily penetrate and disturb this private female space, then England can just as well penetrate and possess agency over Ireland if she is figured as woman. The objectifying gaze of privileged (English) male agency in these examples of Horatio’s gaze in particular demonstrate an assertion of gendered hierarchies, which transcend into a problematic relationship between the two gendered nations.

Through Horatio’s own gaze and narrative Glorvina transforms from the wild Irish girl into a beautiful, silent icon of femininity. The way that Horatio describes Glorvina when he first sees her is not unlike how he frames her elsewhere in the novel. Whether he frames her in domestic or sexualized spaces, the image of Glorvina conveyed is one that figures her as one-dimensional. His gaze, through which the reader perceives the national heroine, represents her as beautiful, silent, feminine, and even inhuman. His description of Glorvina in details that render her as inhuman mirror the hyper-feminine idealization of Tenniel’s Hibernia in *Push.* Although these illustrations appear after the publication of *The Wild Irish Girl,* they share similar
characteristics with Glorvina, especially in her first appearance, which seems more like that of a
mythological and idealized feminine spirit:

... a form so almost impalpably delicate, ... it seemed like the incarnation of some
pure ethereal spirit .... This scarcely ‘mortal mixture of earth’s mould,’ was vested
in a robe of vestal white, which was enfolded beneath the bosom with a narrow
girdle embossed with precious stones.... Such was the figure of the Princess of
Inismore! (48)

Horatio idealizes Glorvina as a Gaelic princess, like some “ethereal spirit” descended from
another plane, “an incarnation,” and not of this world (48). Glorvina’s idealized feminine form
perpetuates forced gendered binaries and hierarchies that preserve the unequal relationship
between Ireland and England. To be described in a sense like a creature, if beautiful, should be
appealing, yet it dehumanizes Glorvina to a point where she becomes supernatural. In that
“ethereal” space, Glorvina is most similar to the aisling as a supernatural feminine figure
symbolic of Ireland. Like the Stage Irishman or Spenser’s savage Irish woman, Glorvina
appropriates these illustrations of Irishness in a way that perpetuates their inhuman
characteristics. In framing her as some otherworldly “incarnation” on temporal ground, this
female ideal exists in a distinctly un-Irish space. Horatio only describes Glorvina in such
unearthly terms, and anglicizes her Irish traits. When writing to his friend in England on the
subject of her brogue, he answers that “the accent to which we English apply that term, is here
generally confined to the lower orders of society,” and that “her English, grammatically correct,
and elegantly pure, is spoken with an accent that could never denote her country” (132).
Horatio’s infatuation and idealization of Glorvina allows her to be depicted in the text as an
unearthly form that grows less and less connected to Ireland. It is only in moments of Irish music or dance that Glorvina’s Irishness is praised. Although he learns to appreciate Irish history and culture, for Horatio, beauty and Irishness cannot coexist.

Horatio first begins to frame Glorvina as one-dimensional in the first moment where Glovina has been figured as an enchanting picture and beautiful voice. While recovering from his injury from his fall at Inismore, Horatio dreams that Glorvina approaches his bedside and “raising her veil, [I] discovered a face I had hitherto rather guessed at, than seen. Imagine my horror — it was the face, the head, of a Gorgon” (60). Horatio’s nightmare illustrates a fear of Irishness shared by Edmund Spenser, but it also reveals what he as the male English narrator becomes himself. It is not Glorvina that turns him to stone, rather, he is the Gorgon that renders her into a one-dimensional object. Horatio’s gaze is certainly privileged as the narrator, and as male and English, he possesses the most power and agency. Like a male Medusa, the female Gorgon that has the power to turn a man to stone, Horatio possesses the power to turn Glorvina from the wild Irish girl to an inhuman, statuesque image of femininity. He does this in way that takes away any agency she may have had, either through her voice or as an educated Gaelic princess. In reappropriating the traditional gendered relationship of Gorgon and victim, Horatio’s privileged position as England transforms Glorvina as Ireland in a way that oppresses her.

In her *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Mary Wollstonecraft recalls the tendency for women to be described as inhuman, and argues that men “[consider] females rather as women than human creatures” (Wollstonecraft 7). In describing her as a beautiful creature, Horatio is the same as the men that Wollstonecraft chastises. As a beautiful creature, Glorvina is more like the dehumanized caricature of the Stage Irishman than she is an empowered female human. She adds
a disclaimer that “my own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their fascinating graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone” (9). Yet, Tracy argues that Glrvina’s education as a “philosophy, obviously endorsed by the novel, aligns Owenson with the radical views of Mary Wollstonecraft” (24). Although Glrvina does have an education, a cause for which Wollstonecraft strives, the way she is represented aligns her more with what Wollstonecraft denounces than with what she desires for women.

_The Wild Irish Girl_ seems to advocate for an English understanding of Irish culture, yet by the end of the epilogue, it requires Horatio, symbolizing a masculinized England, to support Glrvina and therefore Ireland itself. As the narrative concludes with a Union, “Owenson dutifully provides the happy ending, and symbolically returns the land to the Gaels through Glrvina’s marriage, there are too many disturbing questions remaining for this [to] function as a soothing allegory of the Union” (Fegan 40). Owenson’s epilogue, the death of Glrvina’s father, and Glrvina’s cry blaming Horatio and Lord M— for her father’s death, concludes the national tale not with the celebration of a wedding, but with a funeral. Tracy does cite moments where Glrvina appears to be more empowered, but they are complex and problematic. She is educated in a myriad of disciplines, but praised for her artistic accomplishments, like her talents in singing and playing the harp. Tracy also argues that Glrvina’s Catholicism emphasizes a greater understanding between the nations. Yet, Tracy himself acknowledges the complicated representation of Catholicism within the novel when he describes how “Horatio is surprised and delighted to hear Glrvina describe some of the peasants’ religious beliefs at ‘ignorant prejudices’” (17). Although she may have moments where she can raise her voice, or instances
that demonstrate some form of agency, Glorvina cannot escape from the heterosexual marriage plot that awaits her at the end of the novel. That the only resolution can be a union reinforces how Glorvina, as a symbol of Ireland, is subject to Horatio’s privileged position as England.

The national implications of *The Wild Irish Girl*, when placed in a gendered and feminist reading, emphasize the unequal hierarchies perpetuated in Owenson’s novel. When gendered binaries are applied to the dominant and subordinate political relationship in place, the allegory becomes charged with tension. Through this analysis of *The Wild Irish Girl*, the text reinforces the literary tradition Swift establishes, and perpetuates the power structure between the two nations. If Tracy argues that Glorvina demonstrates agency and promotes an equal level between the gendered, and therefore national, hierarchies, he then fails to understand a feminist reading of a paradigm that genders the two nations.
Bibliography


