O’Casey aimed at offering authentic and truthful descriptions of Irishness or Irish socio-political situations (Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* 6). Defining themselves against the English, they stressed their Gaelic culture, focused on their own mythological background and emphasised the Irish setting in their texts. They invented their own myths or showed reality as it was perceived from their point of view. Of course, they could not avoid inventing stereotypes themselves. Still, the attempt to create a more accurate and complex rendering of a nation’s characteristics, although such an approach necessarily remains oversimplifying and distorting, inevitably requires inside knowledge. As a consequence, the Anglo-Irish writers, in many different ways, began to share with their readers private or even intimate information concerning the lives or thoughts of their characters. Thus, the issues of space as well as publicness and privateness have been at the core of Anglo-Irish writing for a long time, and no sphere in Anglo-Irish literature has remained taboo, as the Anglo-Irish authors have tended to turn the most private and intimate experiences into public knowledge.

1. Laws, Landlords and Irish Bulls: Historical Developments and Cultural Implications

Although land of the Irish was confiscated as early as the Norman invasion in the twelfth century, the earliest textual evidence I will concentrate on stems from the seventeenth century. At this stage, Ireland became a place of rebellion and stopped being the remote colony of little interest to the English colonising power (Palmer 8). Nationhood and inhabitants were suddenly brought into focus.

In his essay “A Discovery of the True Causes Why Ireland was Never Entirely Subdued and Brought under Obedience of the Crown of England until the Beginning of His Majesty’s Happy Reign” (1612), Sir John Davies, attorney general in Ireland between 1603 and 1619, declared the “ultimate goal of colonialism […] to be such a thoroughgoing political and cultural assimilation of the Irish” that – except for the geographical distance between England and Ireland – the two countries should melt into one (Fogarty 158). However, Davies identified the Irish law system, the so-called Brehon Laws, as the main factor that prevented the final subjugation of the Irish people and concluded that their laws “made the land waste” and “the people idle” instead of transforming them into valid, hard-working British subjects (218).  

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1 Brehon is the anglicised version of the Irish word *breitheamh*, ‘judge’ (“Law in Gaelic Ireland” 301). The Brehon laws were based on Celtic institutions and covered “a wide variety of topics
image of people’s idleness remained one of the most persistent stereotypes of the Irish for many decades.

The arrival of Oliver Cromwell, whose campaign in Ireland lasted from August 1649 until May 1650, marked the translation of Davies’ theory into violent practice and has been described as “perhaps the greatest exercise in ethnic cleansing in early modern Europe” (Morrill quoted by Wormald 239). Cromwell, however, “projected himself as a providential liberator from Irish barbarism, royalist misrule, and Catholic hypocrisy” (Connolly and Morgan 127). Believing that “a prerequisite in any effort to carry out a successful conquest in Ireland was to undermine the native culture,” the English began to abolish all Brehon Laws and introduced their own legal system instead (Ó Tuama 28). In order to disenfranchise and repress the Catholic clergy and population of Ireland, as well as to favour the Protestants, the Penal Laws were enacted during the fifteen years following the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. These discriminating laws “had been designed (according to one school of thought) to keep Catholics poor and (according to another) to make them Protestants” (Bartlett 50). The laws were thus intended to deprive all Catholics of civic life, to exclude them from education, to leave them in ignorance, and finally, to prevent them from owning land. Catholics were not allowed to attend Catholic church service, nor to educate their own children. Therefore, the Penal Laws are believed to have harmed and victimised all Catholics, although their introduction was primarily a manifestation of English rule designed to banish the Catholic clergy. By 1703, only fourteen per cent of Irish such as contracts, surety, theft, injury, marriage, kinship, insanity, legal procedure, and so on” (300). Old Irish law, as opposed to English law, greatly emphasised the role of kinship. Nowadays, it is considered to have been rather modern among European standards. Having studied the Irish law system, Davies, however, concludes that “if we consider the Irish customs, we shall find that the people which doth use them must of necessity be rebels to all good government, destroy the commonwealth wherein they live, and bring barbarism and desolation upon the richest and most fruitful land of the world” (216). Unlike the law in England where “murder, manslaughter, rape, robbery, and theft are punished with death” (216), in Ireland such offences were met with a fine. However, the aspects of the Brehon laws which Davies was most amazed by were the practices of tanistry, gavelkind and fostering. According to English law at the time, the eldest son inherited his father’s estates. The Irish custom of tanistry described the “ancient custom of choosing an heir apparent of a Celtic chieftain” and thereby attempting to elect the most valid person for the job (footnote by Canny and Carpenter, 217). The Irish custom of gavelkind, also known as partible inheritance, referred to the division of land among the legitimate and illegitimate sons of the dead. Davies was convinced that this practice “needs in the end make a poor gentility” (217). However, he was surprised that these people were “so affected unto their small portions of land as they rather chose to live at home by theft, extortion, and coshering than seek any better fortunes abroad” (218). Although it was normally the parents’ responsibility to rear and educate their children, the Brehon law also knew the option of fostering whereby the children were entrusted in the care of foster-parents – a custom regarded as beneficial for both sides.
land remained in Catholic hands. With the “Act to Prevent the Further Growth of Popery” in 1704, this number dropped even further. This law said that an heir to a Catholic clergyman could not inherit any land unless he was a Protestant at the time of the clergyman’s death. According to the “oath of adjuration,” the heir was, moreover, expected to declare his Protestant faith and abjure the Pope and “the adoration or invocation of the Virgin Mary, or any other saint, and the sacrifice of the mass” because these were “superstitious and idolatrous” (“The Penal Laws” 876). Finally, the heir was asked to completely subjugate himself to English power and the crown. Regardless of the fact that these harsh laws were declared void towards the end of the eighteenth century, the suffering which they caused as well as the psychological impact which they had on the Irish population and Irish thinking are thought to have been enormous (Carpenter, Deane and McCormack 874).

Early evidence of the suffering of the native population is provided by a number of poems written in the Irish language in the seventeenth century. Shortly after the conquest, Irish poetry developed into a private space to which only the Irish population had access. Knowing that the occupiers neither understood, nor spoke Irish and would, therefore, be excluded from this discourse, the authors, as Kiberd indicates, wrote openly and critically, using their language as a weapon to voice the injustices they suffered:

Words have always been the last weapons of the disarmed, and the elaboration of a compensating inner world of fantasy is a feature of the psychology of most colonized and even post-colonial peoples. [...] In countryside overrun by foreign armies, lying to officials could be seen as a highly moral activity, which could save a family or even a whole townland from ruin. The Irishman’s reputation for deceit, guile, and wordplay is not only the result of the distrust nursed among natives of all colonizers; it is also the logical outcome of a life of political oppression. (“Irish Literature” 280)

As early as the seventeenth century, the occupied people thus discovered an alternative space where they could utter their thoughts freely and did not have to lie in order to hide their personal truth. Being aware that the enemies described in their poems were barred from this space, they did not even bother to change these people’s names. The poets’ laments must be regarded as an early postcolonial voice presenting an alternative view, namely the view of the dispossessed and repressed, or, in postcolonial terms, the voice of the other.  

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2 The poems are collected in an anthology referred to as *An Duanaire 1600 – 1900: Poems of the Dispossessed*, edited by Seán Ó Tuama and Thomas Kinsella, the latter of whom also translated the poems into English.

3 In the colonial Irish context, the English colonisers – who were in power of the dominant discourse – came to be represented as the self, whereas the concept of the *other* was applied to the colonised Irish people. In his essay “Literature in Irish; c.1550 – 1690: From the Elizabethan Settlement to the Battle of the Boyne,” Mac Craith, moreover, stresses that,
Albeit being excluded from Irish literature and the issues tackled in the private realm of the poems, the English colonisers sensed that these Gaelic bards were to be judged “as a particular obstacle” in their attempt to subdue the Irish “not just because they epitomized a cultural tradition” which they hoped to abolish, but also because of the social position and political influence they exercised over the Irish population (Kiberd, “Irish Literature” 281).

In his poem “Exodus to Connacht,” Fear Dorcha Ó Mealláin describes the misery and grief he and his people had to endure when in 1653–54, even before the introduction of the Penal Laws, all Catholics of higher rank were, under threat of their lives, forced to leave their homes and resettle in Connacht. The poet identifies the Catholic faith – ironically, the motive for expelling the Irish from their land – as the only possession which could not be taken away from them:

Mícheál feartach ár gcuid stóir,
    Muire Ógh ’s an dá aspal déag,
Brighid, Pádraig agus Eoin –
    is maith an lón creideamh Dé.

Colam Cille feartach caomh,
    ’s Colmán mhac Aoidh, ceann na gcliar,
beid linn uile ar aon tslí
    ’s ná bígi ag caoi fá dhul siar.

Nach dtuigéann sibh, a bhráithre gaoil
    cúrsai an tsaoil le fada buan?
ge móir atá ’nár seilbh,
    beag bheas linn ag dul san uaigh.

Our sole possessions: Michael of miracles,
    the virgin Mary, the twelve apostles,
Brigid, Patrick and Saint John
    — and fine rations: faith in God.

apart from their different geographical, linguistic and cultural background, the colonised people’s adherence to Catholicism was another aspect which became associated with the other. The “symbiosis of Gaelic and Catholic with its counterpoint of English and Protestant was […] a vital factor in defining Irish identity throughout the seventeenth century” (219). Mac Craith wraps up his argument by saying: “It is hardly an exaggeration to claim that perhaps the most enduring legacy [of the Gaelic literati] was the forging of an Irish identity that equated Irishness with Catholicism” (224).

4 As the people had to travel west during wintertime, hundreds of them are reported to have died on the journey (Ó Tuama and Kinsella 103). The phrase “To hell or to Connacht,” which the Irish who were expelled from their land began to use at that time, refers to their choice between death in their native land or life in misery in the west of Ireland, where the land was less fertile.
Sweet Colm Cille of miracles too,
and Colmán Mac Aoidh, poets’ patron,
will all be with us on our way.
Do not bewail our journey West.

Brothers mine, do you not see
the ways of the world a while now?
However much we may possess
we’ll go with little into the grave.

(104–105, l.5–16)

Apart from the firm belief in God, there is a strong sense of community and brotherhood expressed in these stanzas. Those addressed by the speaker in his native tongue, Irish, represent the inner circle of his friends with whom he wishes to share his fear and anguish. The English, on the other hand, he manages to linguistically exclude from this sphere. He then draws a parallel to the people of Israel, who, according to the Bible, had to leave their country for Egypt and were protected by the same God who would now accompany them westward. In the last stanza, returning to the Irish situation, he expresses his sorrow over the loss of home rule and control:

A Dhia atá fial, a thriath na mbeannachta,
féach na Gaeil go léir gan bharanta;
má támid ag triall siar go Connachtá,
fáigmaid ’nár ndiaidh fó chian ar seanchairde.

God Who art generous, O Prince of Blessings,
behold the Gael, stripped of authority.
Now as we journey Westward into Connacht old friends we’ll leave behind us in their grief.

(108–109, l.49–52)

The poet is much distressed that, by going into exile, he and his people are forced to abandon the old friends who share their misery. This underlines how closely feelings of dispossession and the deprivation of land are related to loss of community and one’s sense of belonging.

The two poems “Valentine Browne” and “No Help I’ll Call,” both written in the 1720s, illustrate Aogán Ó Rathaille’s attempt and failure to regain his land from the new landowner Browne, land which was confiscated in 1690 after the Battle of the Boyne. The poet emphasises the pain he has suffered “since the alien devils entered the land of Conn” (161, l.2). He bewails his fate and complains that “[o]ur land, our shelter, our woods and our level ways / are pawned for a penny by a crew from the land of Dover” (165, l.7–8). The
depressing tone of the second poem points to the speaker’s disillusionment with the new order and landlords. It also illustrates how much he regrets that the past system was lost and the former landlords have been displaced:

Fán dtromlot d’imigh ar chine na rí mórga
treabhann om uiscannaibh uisce go scímhglórách;
is lonnmhär chuirit mo shrutha-sa foinseoga
san abhainn do shileas ó Thruipill go caoin-Eochaill.

Stadfadsa feasta – is gar dom éag gan mhoill
ó treascradh dragain Leamhan, Léin is Laoi;
rachad ’na bhfasc le searc na laoch don chill,
na flatha fá raibh mo shean roimh éag do Chríost.

Our proud royal line is wrecked; on that account
the water ploughs in grief down from my temples,
 sources sending their streams out angrily
to the river that flows from Truipeall to pleasant Eochaill.

I will stop now – my death is hurrying near
now the dragons of the Leamhan, Loch Léin and the Laoi are destroyed.
In the grave with this cherished chief I’ll join those kings
my people served before the death of Christ.

(166–167, l.21–28)

With the help of an agricultural metaphor, the poet describes how the tears run down his face and channel into his flesh like water into soil. He presents his tears – and metonymically his entire body – as the source of several Irish rivers and thus symbolically states his natural bond to the region. This practice reinforces the impression that he cannot possibly endure to be separated from his native soil. Alienated and inconsolable, the poet foreshadows his death in the last stanza, but seems convinced that once buried he will not only be reunited with the land but also spiritually connected with the ancient heroes of the past.

Fear Dorcha Ó Mealláin and Aogán Ó Rathaille’s poems primarily centre round the loss of land. In the poem “Keep Fast Under Cover, O Stones – On the Death of James Dawson” by Seán Clárach Mac Dónaill (1691–1754), however, the landlord’s treatment of the occupied Irish is criticised in an outspoken and blunt manner, which remains unique in this poetry collection. The landlord’s cold-blooded, merciless personality is unmasked when the poet reveals: “Famine he fastened on the people to keep them in thrall” (173, l.8). In fact, Dawson often answered his tenants’ begging for food by using violence and beating these men up (l.12). Thus, hunger and killing are identified as consciously applied means of keeping the natives under control and dominion.
Referring to the late landlord as “this grey-haired Dawson, a bloody and treacherous butcher” (l.2) and “a ravenous dog” (175, l.22), the speaker further underlines his deep-rooted hatred of this man. The description of the landlord’s unparalleled brutality – he was “ravaging and hanging and mangling the poor for ever” (173, l.4, my emphasis) – indicates the degree of his violence as well as the degrading attitude towards his tenants. Moreover, the poet’s choice of verbs to describe the landlord’s actions recalls his metaphors of Dawson as a “butcher” and a “dog” behaving in a most cruel, and – in the case of “mangling” – even inhuman, animalistic way. After the death of the detested figure, the poet beseeches the stones to keep Dawson imprisoned “in closet of clay” forever (l.1). Imprisoned by the gravestone, the poet feels that the landlord, this shameless “bloodhound” (175, l.15) and “monster” (l.33), will be exposed to the forces of nature and finally punished for all his deeds. The stone will hopefully “grind his snarl and his yellow gums” (177, l.37) and his “carcass be picked by hungry and busy maggots” (l.43) leaving Dawson as powerless and defenceless as his tenants were under his reign. Addressing his former master directly, the poet expresses his hope that Dawson will be barred from afterlife for good and that “he or his like may never appear again” (l.40):

Great were your riches once, when you were alive,
and cruel your doom on the weak and leaderless,
but a steadfast statute was passed for you below:
cold and thirst and heat and burning fires!

O gravestone, grind his snarl and his yellow gums,
his eyes and skull and tongue and great black hole,
all joints and sinews (and quick!) of this hump of slime
that he or his like may never appear again.
Though arrogant ever, disdainful and avaricious,
your fortune will fall to a miser after you,
your carcass be picked by hungry and busy maggots,
and your soul boil for years without number in the Great Pot.

(174–175, l.25–28 and 176–177, l.37–44)

If the strong Catholic background of the Irish and the period the poem was written in is taken into consideration, the poet’s condemnation of this landlord for whom there should be no redemption is even more remarkable.

However, not only English but also Irish landlords were often alienated from the local population; in spite of owning land in Ireland, Irish landlords who spent most of their time and money in England were known as Irish absentees. In her novels Castle Rackrent (1800) and The Absentee (1812), Maria Edgeworth expresses concern over the status quo on behalf of the Irish population. She criticises the landlords for recklessly exploiting their tenants and arbitrarily raising rents. Both novels are deeply rooted in their time and place. Ireland at the time was still a country of which the English knew little but against which they held countless prejudices. By cleverly introducing different levels of narration in Castle Rackrent, Edgeworth manages to reveal this bigotry. The implied author deliberately makes fun of the misconceptions held by the English and even exaggerates the descriptions of the Irish character. The landlords are presented in a particularly uncivilised manner, each of them representing a certain flaw. The existing stereotypes of the Irish are ridiculed by means of irony. As with The Poems of the Dispossessed, the message of Edgeworth’s novel can be read as an early postcolonial statement, explaining the true problems of the country to the metropolis and centre of power.

In Castle Rackrent, the homodiegetic narrator Thady Quirk illustrates his masters’ inability to deal with financial matters, their uncivilised behaviour and their exploitation of their tenants. However, the old and “honest” Irish peasant, who has served five landlords during his life, does not intend to be disloyal. In fact, he has “out of friendship for the family, […] voluntarily undertaken to publish the Memoirs of the Rackrent Family […]” (Castle Rackrent 7, original emphasis). Incapable of lying, or rather too ignorant to do so, Thady informs the English reader that the detailed account of his masters’ lives reveals nothing but the complete truth known to everyone in Ireland:

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5 Rimmon-Kenan defines a ‘homodiegetic’ narrator as one who, “at least in some manifesta-
tions of ‘his self’,” participates in the story he tells (95).
As for all I have here set down from memory and hearsay of the family, there’s nothing but truth in it from beginning to end, that you [i.e. the reader] may depend upon, for where’s the use of telling lies about the things which every body knows as well as I do? (96)

In his innocent, naive, and open manner, Thady shows “the decline and the fall of a dynasty of Irish landlords of the mid-eighteenth century […]” (Watson, Rackrent xv). His honesty and the absurd notion that unconditional loyalty to one’s master is a servant’s utmost duty prove to be a particularly clever textual device. The servant comes across as a simpleton who does not understand the possible implications of his revelations and does not see that he makes himself an object of ridicule. However, more importantly, this character can talk openly about the corruption and mismanagement of his different masters and thereby offer insight into a rotten system. His knowledge as an insider reveals elements of the system which the landlords want to hide and keep secret: “[…] the Rackrents – constantly in debt, in default of heir-male and given to dying young from hunting mishaps, drink and duels” (Burgess, “The National Tale” 47). As he presents the private and true side of landlordism in Ireland, Thady unveils his masters’ stupidity, laziness and trickery. Corruption, alcoholism, and domestic violence are only some of the issues described in a thoroughly unconcerned manner. Nevertheless, despite his honesty, Thady’s limited understanding and his complete confidence that his masters serve everyone’s best interest make him an unreliable narrator. He fails to recognise that his story could never be the official version welcomed by his masters and that he harms his masters in spite of honouring the master-servant relationship more highly than any family bond.  

In addition to the narrator, a fictional editor was added to achieve yet another degree of distance between Thady and the implied author. The editor

6 Although Thady claims that it is in his nature always to be honest as well as “true and loyal” to the Rackrent family, the different personalities and views of his five masters – which he is always in full agreement with – require a certain adaptability of his value system and attitudes whenever a new master arrives at Castle Rackrent (8). Sir Kit’s wife, Jessica, mocks Thady for this characteristic trait. But Thady appears unaware of her derision. He even boasts that had Kit’s wife “meant to make any stay in Ireland, I stood a great chance of being a great favourite with her, for when she found I understood the weather-cock, she was always finding some pretence to be talking to me, and asking me which way the wind blew, and was it likely, did I think, to continue fair for England” (Castle Rackrent 36, my emphasis).

7 Much to Thady’s anger and disgrace, his son Jason, the only character in the text who shows financial capabilities, ends up being the master of Castle Rackrent at the time of Thady’s story-telling.

If the significance of irony used in Castle Rackrent is taken into account, Thady’s definite favouring of the master-servant relationship over any bonding between family members in Ireland could likewise be read as a particularly clever narratological device used by the implied author.
feels that “love of truth, which in some minds is innate and immutable, necessarily leads to a love of secret memoirs and private anecdotes” (*Castle Rackrent* 1). He compares the reader’s prime interest in private matters with a theatre audience, where “we [i.e. the audience] anxiously beg to be admitted behind the scenes, that we may take a nearer view of the actors and actresses” (2). The reader of *Castle Rackrent* is thus allowed to see an unveiled, unmasked and private picture of Irish life, while the editor is protected from possible criticism thanks to his distance from Thady. The fictional editor, fully aware of the effect of Thady’s frankness, however, admits that

[t]hose who were acquainted with the manners of a certain class of the gentry of Ireland some years ago, will want no evidence of the truth of honest Thady’s narrative: to those who are totally unacquainted with Ireland, the following Memoirs will perhaps be scarcely intelligible, or probably they may appear perfectly incredible. For the information of the ignorant English reader a few notes have been subjoined by the editor, and he had it once in contemplation to translate the language of Thady into plain English; but Thady’s idiom is incapable of translation, and besides, the authenticity of his story would have been more exposed to doubt if it were not told in his own characteristic manner. (4, original emphasis)

The editor’s ironic comment on his “contemplation to translate the language of Thady into plain English” hints at the great loss which a publicly accessible version of this intimate and faithful description, in other words, a minimisation of the events in order to reach a politically correct version for the public, would have suffered. In *Castle Rackrent*, the Irish dialect and point of view is, therefore, taken as the standard. As a result of this presentation, the editor suggests that, in order to understand the story and the Irish situation properly, the English reader needs a glossary.

Edgeworth’s novel *The Absentee* also establishes a counter-position to a presumably official version of landlordism in Ireland. The text points towards various deficiencies in the country and identifies the absentees as the root of the problem. Count O’Halloran, one of the few Irish nobles presented in a favourable light, defines an absentee as a person who is away “from his home, his affairs, his duties, and his estate” and, at a later stage, he refers to such people as “enemies to Ireland” (*The Absentee* 51 and 117). Lady Clonbrony, the protagonist’s mother, is a representative of these absentee figures. She repeatedly denies her own roots and her cultural heritage in order to be fully accepted by London society. Although the English ladies attend Lady Clonbrony’s social events, they sneer at her behind her back for trying to imitate their British accent and for calling herself half-English. This mockery indicates that from an English point of view Lady Clonbrony could never pass as an English lady:
‘If you knew all she endures, to look, speak, move, breathe, like an Englishwoman, you
would pity her,’ said lady Langdale.
‘Yes, and you cawnt conceive the peens she teekes to talk of the teebles and cbeers and to
thank Q, and with so much teeste to speak pure English,’ said Mrs Dareville.
‘Pure cockney, you mean,’ said lady Langdale.
‘But does lady Clonbrony expect to pass for English?’ said the duchess.
‘O yes! Because she is not quite Irish bred and born – only bred, not born,’ said Mrs
Dareville. ‘And she could not be five minutes in your grace’s company before she
would tell you that she was Henglish, born in Hoxfordsire.’
‘She must be a vastly amusing personage – I should like to meet her, if one could see
and hear her incog.,’ said the duchess. (2, original emphasis)

The ladies’ condescending comments about Lady Clonbrony and her affected
speech illustrate that, as a nouveau-riche and as an Irish woman, she is a
member of a group who will never be admitted to the inner and intimate circle
of the English upper class:

[…] lady St James contrived to mortify and to mark the difference between those with
whom she was, and with whom she was not, upon terms of intimacy and equality. Thus
the ancient grandees of Spain drew a line of demarcation between themselves and the
newly created nobility. Whenever or wherever they met, they treated the new nobles
with utmost respect, never addressed them but with all their titles, with low bows, and
with all the appearance of being, with the most perfect consideration, any thing but
their equals; whilst towards one another another the grandees laid aside their state, and
omitting their titles, it was ‘Alcalá – Medina – Sidonia – Infantado,’ and a freedom and
familiarity which marked equality. Entrenched in etiquette in this manner, and
mocked with marks of respect, it was impossible either to intrude or to complain of
being excluded. (56)

Disgusted by this society after he has observed the subtle ways in which these
ladies humiliate his mother, Lord Colambre, the main protagonist and Lady
Clonbrony’s son, decides to travel to his homeland to explore the true and
hidden Ireland, where he spent his childhood. Initially, Lady Dashfort, an
English lady living in Ireland, manages to portray the Irish in the worst light
possible. She calls the native population “[b]arbarians” and adds, “are not we
the civilized English, come to teach them manners and fashions?” (96) As soon
as the protagonist succeeds in freeing himself from her influence, however, he
attempts to discover the true character of the island. His new and noble friend
Sir James Brooke tells him that indeed shortly after the flight of the landlords
and their families rushing to London in high hopes to join the British upper
class, “[n]ew faces and new equipages appeared: people, who had never been
heard of before, started into notice, pushed themselves forward, not scrupling
to elbow their way even at the castle” (80). However, this state of uncivilised
behaviour by some of the native population did not last very long, in fact,
some of the Irish nobility and gentry […] were glad to return home to refit; and they brought with them a new stock of ideas, and some taste for science and literature, which, within these latter years, have become fashionable, indeed indispensable, in London. That part of the Irish aristocracy, who, immediately upon the first incursions of the vulgarians, had fled in despair to their fastnesses in the country, hearing of the improvements which had gradually taken place in society, and assured of the final expulsion of the barbarians, ventured from their retreats, and returned to their posts in town. So that now […] you find a society in Dublin composed of a most agreeable and salutary mixture of birth and education, gentility and knowledge, manner and matter; and you see pervading the whole new life and energy, new talent, new ambition, a desire and a determination to improve and be improved – a perception that higher distinction can now be obtained in almost all company, by genius and merit, than by airs and address […]. (80–81)

Apart from disagreeing with Lady Dashfort’s image of the Irish as unrefined and primitive, Sir James Brooke’s expression, they “returned to their posts in town,” clearly indicates what he considers to be the true responsibility of the Irish landlords.

Disguised as Mr Evans, Lord Colambre visits his family’s estates, which allows him to gain insight into the hidden truth of how the estates are run by his father’s agents. During his journey, he meets all kinds of country people and listens to their worries. In fact, in the first village, called Colambre, the inhabitants praise his father’s agent, Mr Burke, as a blessing for everyone. Lord Colambre learns that his father, or rather his father’s intermediary, however, is strongly displeased with Mr Burke because the agent has “not ruined his tenantry, by forcing them to pay more than the land is worth” and because he has “not squeezed money from them, by fining down rents […]” (129). At Clonbrony, his father’s other estate, Lord Colambre is introduced to the greatly praised agent, Mr Nicholas Garraghty, who is quite the opposite of Mr Burke. The agent’s corruption and his oppression of the tenants are sharply contrasted with the kind and simple hospitality which Lord Colambre encounters staying at the O’Neil family, his father’s tenants. In Edgeworth’s novel, it is the tenants’ values and attitudes as well as their kind behaviour towards strangers and amongst each other which are presented as the true images of Irishness. As a result of his visits to the family’s estates, Lord Colambre recognises that his parents in England unknowingly exploit the Irish tenants. By letting Lord Colambre develop a sense of responsibility for the tenants and a strong bond with the land and his native culture, the narrator suggests a remedy to this situation. Mr Nicholas Garraghty is made redundant, and Mr Burke is asked to run both estates. In _The Absentee_, the piece of private truth revealed to the reader suggests that Irish tenants have a right to landlords who fulfil their duties by taking care of Irish property in order to facilitate life within the country.
Edgeworth’s criticism of the landowners is particularly remarkable because of her conclusion that the landlords and not the rest of the population were to blame for the difficult Irish situation and because this proto-postcolonial message from the Irish periphery was addressed to her former homeland, England. The private or hidden truth of Ireland is, as found in *Castle Rackrent* and *The Absentee*, that in many cases the power is in the hands of landlords or agents who neither understand nor care about their business, and run the country to the disadvantage of the Irish people. Yet, the political situation presented in her novels shortly before and after the Act of Union between Ireland and England was not the only source of criticism for Edgeworth. At the same time, she greatly disapproved of the highly stereotypical portrayal of the Irish, which had been established over the past centuries in English drama and was now taken for the plain truth by the ‘culturally ignorant’ English theatre audience. From the Irish standpoint, the stereotypical and humiliating representation of their character was a painful sign that the deprivation of their land had gone hand in hand with their losing the battle over language and self-definition.

The pivotal role given to the power over language both in colonial and postcolonial times has often been highlighted. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, for instance, identify “control over language” as “[o]ne of the main features of imperial oppression” because “[l]anguage becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of ‘truth’, ‘order’ and ‘reality’ become established” (*The Empire* 7). Ngugi underlines this notion, arguing that

[l]anguage carries culture, and culture carries […] the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politics and at the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other beings. Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world. (16)

Thus, for a colonised people, losing the struggle over language also means losing the power of shaping reality from ‘within.’ As the colonised stand for the *other*, the unfamiliar in the coloniser, the act of definition is often linked with being fundamentally misunderstood and misjudged. Ngugi also refers to this risk when he, indirectly, equates the denial or dismissal of one’s language with that of a people’s culture:

Culture embodies those moral, ethical and aesthetic values, the set of spiritual eyeglasses, through which [people] come to view themselves and their place in the universe. Values are the basis of a people’s identity, their sense of particularity as
members of the human race. All this is carried by language. Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people’s experience in history. (14–15)

This power struggle over language and the shaping of public truth and reality has proved to be a particularly successful method of depriving a people of their own myth of identity or nation. For the Irish, this meant that the power to publicly define their own truth and identity was denied by the occupiers. Ireland was transformed into a fabrication, an invention by the English colonisers. A set of firm beliefs about the Irish other defined both land and people. Typically, the failure to acknowledge the language and culture gap—the metonymic gap—between the two countries is, according to Palmer, said to have added to the misrepresentation of the Irish culture and its people:

Throughout the predominantly Irish-speaking island, the meeting of native and newcomer implied an inevitable linguistic corollary: hibernophone met anglophone. Yet the reality of that encounter with its inevitable verbal and gestural fumblings—the sign language, the pidgin phrases, the macaronics of the new speaker, the mispronunciations and misunderstandings, the staggered exchanges mediated by interpreters and their variously unreliable glosses, the whole drama of language in flux—is blacked out. English writers consistently erased the majority language, reducing Irish-language utterances to English paraphrases. (45)8

In her chapter “‘A Bad Dream with no Sound’: the Representation of Irish in the Texts of the Elizabethan Conquest,” Palmer further argues that because the English occupiers had no command of the Irish language, the Irish-speaking community was occasionally represented as “mute” in Elizabethan texts. This muteness in itself was, on the other hand, of a barbarian and noisy quality:

But what remains when speech is denied is not necessarily silence. The mute are not noiseless and these texts are full of strange, disturbing sounds: cries, yelps, groans, strangulated shouts, whispers. The language which is refused a hearing as articulate speech is picked up instead as a chorus of forlorn and menacing sounds-effects. […]

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8 According to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, the metonymic gap is a “term for what is arguably the most subtle form of abrogation. The metonymic gap is that cultural gap formed when appropriations of a colonial language insert unglossed words, phrases or passages from a first language, or concepts, allusions or references that may be unknown to the reader. […] The local reader is thus able to represent his or her world to the colonizer (and others) in the metropolitan language, and at the same time to signal and emphasize a difference from it. In effect, the writer is saying ‘I am using your language so that you will understand my world, but you will also know by the differences in the way I use it that you cannot share my experience’” (Key Concepts 137). Palmer argues that failing to recognise the difference in experience and language between the two countries and between the British and the Irish culture has considerably added to the stereotypical rendering of the Irish population (40–73).
There is nothing casual about downgrading words into cries, transforming the meaning of another language into babble. (Palmer 64–65)

For decades, the Irish, therefore, were defined from the outside and their stereotypical portrayal on the English stage was regarded as a given truth among British audiences. Maria and her father Richard Edgeworth, among others, tried to unmask the cliché of the Irish as “hot-heated, rude, and nomadic” (Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* 9). In their essay on “Irish Bulls,” for instance, they criticised the prototypical colonial conduct of lowering the colonised in status and character to prove to the colonised that they were essentially unfit to govern themselves. In an imaginary discussion between one representative of each of the two countries, the Englishman declares, rather surprised, after his visit to the island:

I imagined that I should have nothing to drink but whiskey, that I should have nothing to eat but potatoes, that I should sleep in mud-walled cabins; that I should, when awake, hear nothing but the Irish howl, the Irish brogue, Irish answers and Irish bulls; and that if I smiled at any of these things, a hundred pistols would fly from their holsters to give or demand satisfaction. But experience taught me better things: I found that the stories I had heard were tales of other times. Their hospitality, indeed, continues to this day. (127, original emphasis)

These expectations of the true Irish as a savage, drunken creature producing strange, animal-like sounds recall images in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* of the supposedly uncivilised and savage Caliban. Prospero describes him as “[a] freckled whelp, hag-born – not honoured with / A human shape” (*The Tempest* 1.2.282-283). Caliban, a prototypical colonial character, whose name echoes the word *cannibal*, is also said to have produced strange sounds and growls when Prospero and Miranda first came to the island. Miranda – initially pitying Caliban – taught him to speak, an act she now bitterly regrets:

*MIRANDA.* Abhorrèd slave,  
Which any print of goodness wilt not take,  
Being capable of all ill! I pitied thee,  
Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour  
One thing or other. When thou didst not, savage,  
Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like  
A thing most brutish, I endowed thy purposes  
With words that made them known. (1.2.351-358)

Caliban, on the other hand, argues that his deficiencies in English are not his own fault; Miranda’s illness is to be blamed. Due to her weak health, he only

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9 The expression ‘Irish Bull’ refers to the supposedly garrulous personality of the Irish and is often used as a synonym to describe the stage-Irishman (“Stage-Irishman” 533–535).
learnt to curse properly in the foreign language: “You taught me language, and my profit on’t / Is, I know how to curse. The red-plague rid you / For learning me your language!” (1.2.363-365) Postcolonial readings have since questioned the colonial reading and representation of Caliban. Barker and Hulme, for instance, stress that Caliban is indeed presented by the other characters as a sub-human monster. When his language is examined more closely, however, his words are deeply poetic and, arguably, among the most lyrical in the play (238). His description of the island is of a dream-like quality, which reveals his love for the island and undermines his representation as a savage (*The Tempest* 3.2.127-135).

Similarly, the Englishman in Edgeworth’s narrative has to acknowledge that the notions he had of the Irish people differ considerably from his experiences. He admits that his preconceptions were stereotypical and prejudiced. Remarkably, however, he does not denounce the notions of the Irish as a stupid and uncivilised people as mere fantasies or misinformation. Calling these stories “tales of other times,” he concludes that, in this case, these representations must be truthful reminiscences of the past (127, original emphasis).

Postcolonial studies further show that the invention of colonised characters like the stage-Irishman is by no means an exception and should be read against the background of imperialism and colonialism. The stereotypes used to describe the colonised people, provide insight into the fears and world-view of the coloniser, whereas the justification of this connection with the colonised either remains obscure or does not exist at all. Organised in a system of binary oppositions between coloniser and colonised, colonial literature has been used as an ideological instrument to convey the attitude of the other as inferior, negative and second-rate. Not surprisingly, clichés of colonised peoples all over the world, therefore, resemble one another: “Colonial power tends to identify subject people as passive, in need of guidance, incapable of governing themselves, romantic, passionate, having a disregard for rules, barbaric” (Balzano 92). Kiberd, among others, distinguishes two types of stage-Irishmen, one consisting of “the threatening, vainglorious soldier,” the other of “the feckless but cheerily reassuring servant” (*Inventing Ireland* 12). The representative of the first group “was a landowner, a man of means, with military experience” who is thought to have had his roots in the character of

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10 I will adapt Kiberd’s definition of the two terms *imperialism* and *colonialism* since they fully serve my purpose. He defines *imperialism* as “the seizure of land from its owners and their consequent subjugation by military force and cultural programming,” such as “the description, mapping and ecological transformation of the occupied territory,” whereas *colonialism* is referred to as “the planting of settlers in the land thus seized, for the purpose of expropriating its wealth and for the promotion of the occupier’s trade and culture” (*Inventing Ireland* 5).
Captain Macmorris in Shakespeare’s *Henry V* (Murray, “Drama 1690–1800” 504). The following minor scene, spoken in prose, is exemplary of Captain Macmorris’ personality. The hot-tempered Irish Captain is easily infuriated by the Welsh Captain Fluellen when he feels that he is treated disrespectfully by the Welshman:

**FLUELLEN.** Captain Macmorris, I think, look you, under your correction, there is not many of your nation –

**MACMORRIS.** Of my nation? What ish my nation? Ish a villain, and a bastard, and a knave, and a rascal? What ish my nation? Who talks of my nation? (Henry V 3.2.121-126)

This presumably drunken soldier, who completely disavows his own nation and the images of his people, made a great impression on the English audience.

The English wanted to see a savage or traitor in the Irish as well as “disorderly manners and insalubrious habits, together with the Hiberno-English dialect or brogue and a concomitant propensity for illogical utterance increasingly identified as his exclusive property and called ‘the Irish bull’” (“Stage-Irishman” 533). The captain, similar to the servant type, was portrayed as “ignorant by English standards and [using] the language inefficiently and at times ridiculously, with Gaelicisms sprinkled throughout his speech” (Murray, “Drama 1690–1800” 504). The second group of stage-Irishmen consisted of the “uneducated servant whose mistakes, verbal and logical alike, provide the basis of popularity” (504). According to Murray, Farquhar’s comic Irishman, Teague (*The Twin Rivals*, first staged in 1702), for instance, who “is presented with a broad accent, spelt phonetically, and a tendency to contradict himself foolishly, using what became known as Irish bulls,” serves as a prime example of this group and “offered a variation on the Shakespearian fool” (504).11 To please the English audience, Irish playwrights, such as Farquhar, Thomas Sheridan (Captain O’Blunder in *The Brave Irishman: or, Captain O’Blunder*) and his son Richard Brinsley Sheridan (Sir Lucius O’Trigger in *The Rivals*), complied with this taste of portraying the Irishman either “as amusing and harmless” or as “sinister and dangerous” (504). Although their portrayals of the Irish characters cannot be taken very seriously

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11 According to *A Dictionary of Hiberno-English* the name “Teague /tig/ also Teigue, Taig” serves as a “nickname for the typical Irishman, especially a Catholic” and is derived from the Irish word *Tadhg* (268).

As in the case of Macmorris, Teague’s statements – mostly due to his strong accent – were interpreted as a sign of his stupidity: “Deel tauke [the devil take] me but dish ish a most shweet business indeed; maishers play the fool, and shervants must shuffer for it. I am prishoner in the constable’s house, be me shoul, and shent abrode to fetch some bail for my maishter; but foo shall bail poor Teague agra? [Enter Constance] O, dere ish my maishter’s old love. Indeed, I fear dish business will spoil his fortune” (Farquhar 137).