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**The State as an Estate
In the Novels of
Jane Austen and Maria Edgeworth**

A Thesis Submitted to the Department of English Language &
Literature, in Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts in English Literature

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2004

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my deep gratitude to *Professor Waffia Mursi* for her guidance, sound instructions and support. I am greatly indebted to her for the material she provided me with, for the patience and tolerance she endured during the composition of this work which without her cooperation would not have been accomplished.

I would like to thank **Professor Nadia Suliman** as well as **Professor Fadillah Fattouh** for the effort they exerted in evaluating my work.

I owe a special debt to my **dearest mother** for her sincere and intimate support at all times. I am very grateful to the person who has endured much and never let me down, my **dear husband** for his heroic tolerance and practical support.

This work could not have been done without their help. To them and to others I extend my gratitude.

I dedicate this work to the soul of my dear **beloved father**.

Abstract

This study reveals the tensions between the colonized and the colonizer, the landlord and the tenant, the superior and the inferior, the female and the male within the ideology of the empire. It debates the sociopolitical issues of the Ascendancy, reflecting on the religious unrest and the political unrest in Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* (1800) and *The Absentee* (1812). The study also reveals the conduct of war between England and France as well as the Regency Crisis and the scandals connected to it in Austen's Regency novels *Mansfield Park* (1814) and *Persuasion* (1818). The thesis reflects on the British empire and its expansion, the radical changes in Britain's legal system of governance, both at home and abroad. Austen suggests alternative visions of political governance that are based on the social construction of gender. The study also depicts the vulnerability of women in the economic market place and her dependency on man (materialistic dependence) due to the lack of profession for women, which is widely available for men. The family reflects the political condition of the state where men represent the colonizer, the superior and the authoritative, but women represent the colonized, the inferior and the vulnerable. The thesis is divided into an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion.

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CH. I
THE BIG HOUSE:
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THE BIG HOUSE: TRADITION AND IDEOLOGY

The Big House is part and parcel of the Irish History and therefore the events that affected it should be discussed deliberately before going on through Maria Edgeworth's novels. The estates within and the estates without establish the social order and wealth of Big House and thus the state as a whole.

The Irish “Big House” contrasts with the English “Great House”, notably in that the former is denied the degree of endorsement, moral and social, embodied in the word “great”. This in turn allows one to point out that the merely physical scale of the “Big House” is all the more readily conceded if one accepts that Irish society was polarized between such residences and a virtually invisible landscape of cabins and cottages. Within such a polarized world, the Big House occupies an ambiguous place in moral terms, with the result that it is left in serene isolation from any comparative measurement which might encourage conceptualization. (Rauchbauer 1992: 35)

The Irish “Big House” is not as great and as large as the English Great House in area and appearance, but it is contrasted

to the Irish one room hovels and cottages. The Big House is considered as social residence and thus it is symbolic of a social base – the Ascendancy, it is considered as the locus or the setting of that formation.

The Big Houses of Ireland contain the myth of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. They offer an explanation of that class, its style and manners; they set out its relation with its environment and culture, and they plot its eventual disintegration and decomposition ... the Big House in this country... mean(s) the Protestant Big House, with its Anglo-Irish tradition and culture; and the distinction is properly made between that tradition and culture and what we might call the native Irish tradition, which is Roman Catholic. (ix)

The Big House became a land mark of the English domination and an assertion and a protection of the English identity (the symbol of imperialism).

The transformations that the Ascendancy class went through are worth mentioning to widen our perspective of the scope of the Anglo – Irish class in contrast to the tenants. The Ulster plantation of 1603 (after Ireland was conquered, reflected the end of the old Irish world) changed many things. The English authority extended for the first time, over every part of Ireland and the old Gaelic ways were withering. This Ulster plantation

constituted a massive colonization of Northern Ireland, where settlers from Scotland and Northern England, dispossessed the Gaelic Irish, who were gradually forced by economic pressure to move to the worst land. In this region they initiated a development which was different from the rest of Ireland in many aspects. When the English parliament had disposed of Charles I (in 1649) and abolished the monarchy, it turned its attention to Ireland. In the wake of Cromwell's armies in the 1650's, there were massive confiscations of land by the Cromwellian parliament. The Cromwellian settlement was not so much a plantation, as a transference of the sources of wealth and power from Catholics to Protestants. What it created was not a Protestant community, but a Protestant upper class. Land was the source of wealth and the basis of power; to take it from the Catholic Irish and to give it to Protestants would weaken the resistance to the English rule and bring into being a Protestant community sufficiently numerous and powerful to keep the peace in Ireland. In 1688 revolution seven English notables invited William of Orange, (husband of James' Protestant daughter) to invade England and drive out his father-in-law. The king's cause quickly collapsed in England, and he took refuge in the France of Louis XIV. In 1690, the French sent 7000 troops to James II but demanded that as many Irish troops should be sent to France in their place. Afterwards William came over to Ireland and this was

risky because England was threatened by France and he had no command of the sea. While he was in Ireland the French defeated the English and the Dutch fleets at Beachy Head, and the way was clear for a French invasion of England, which did not take place. The two kings met at the Boyne, where the battle took place. The Battle of Boyne (1690), the battle of the two kings, where William of Orange put James II to flight marks the beginning of the Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland. During the eighteenth century the Protestants dispossessed the Catholics and relegated them to a marginal position in society. The feudal system spread over the country; the landlord Protestant Ascendancy (aristocrats and gentry) controlled representation in parliament and politics. These represented a network of families whose income derived from the land where the Catholic Irish worked for them. The Catholics were excluded from participation in most areas of public life. The Treaty of Limerick in 1691 was a great advantage to William as it put an end to the troublesome side-show in Ireland. The Catholics share of land was reduced to about one-seventh; there was confiscation of the property of those who had gone to France, or who had died and some of those who had surrendered. All the Catholics were soon subjected to new penal laws and the century that followed (the eighteenth century) was the classic age of Protestant Ascendancy. Therefore the treaty marked a great defeat for the Catholic cause in the end

of the seventeenth century. For centuries, restrictions had been imposed on the Irish trade by the Westminster parliament, and in 1699 Ireland's export trade in manufactured woollen goods was destroyed. In Ireland the persecuted formed the majority. In 1720 the act of parliament gave the right to Westminster parliament to legislate for Ireland.

To maintain the Protestant settlement in the church as well as the state, the Irish parliament enacted what came to be called the 'popery code' which would keep the Catholics in a state of permanent subjection. Maureen Wall states in "The Age of the Penal Laws (1691-1778)" that:

The penal laws against religious worship were largely allowed to fall into desuetude from about 1716... The penal laws which were enforced... were those which debarred Catholics from parliament, from holding any government office – high or low – from entering the legal profession and from holding commissions in the army and navy. (Moody & Martin 1992: 218-19).

The Catholics main grievance was the tithe payment to the established church; the general condition of poverty of the Irish was also due to the increase in population which pushed up the already high rents of land. Moreover, the trade restrictions and lack of mineral wealth and business derived the mass of population to depend on agriculture for a livelihood and to

depend on the potato for food. In addition to these, the condition for Catholic worship was very harsh and the mass was often said in private houses or open field, and priests were in the threat of being hung if found in their devotions with the congregation.

The second half of the eighteenth century was full of agrarian unrest and disturbances due to the forced labour, and the unemployment. The years between 1762 and 1778 introduced bills to permit Catholics to take mortgages on land and to take leases up to hundred years; the British government decided to force the issue of Catholic relief, as the wartime strategy and security of empire demanded it, as the English were threatened by French invasion in 1778.

The year 1766 saw the first act against the whiteboys, as “Father Nicholas Sheehy was convicted on a trumped-up charge of murder ... and was hanged, drawn and quartered,”(228) for expressing sympathy with the peasantry in their distress. His grave became a place of pilgrimage and his death provided later generations of whiteboys with a patron saint. The years from 1778 to 1829 or till the end of the century, saw first the struggle for complete equality, but when this failed a struggle for political supremacy between the privileged minority on one hand and the unprivileged majority on the other, was called for. Henry Grattan, after entering parliament in 1775, demanded that Ireland should be granted the status of an independent nation linked to Britain by

a common crown and a common political tradition, but his demand was shunned. In 1779, the commercial restrictions were abolished. The new agitation was gaining force against the limitations on the powers of the Irish parliament imposed earlier by Poynings' law, and the act of 1720 declaring the right of the British parliament to legislate for Ireland. "The fall of the Bastille (in 1789) – were to start off a great political seismic disturbance ... the French revolution ... might be said that its driving ideas can be best expressed by the words liberty and equality." (236). The French revolution influenced the whole of Europe and attempted to reconstruct many things.

Of course many of the principles the French were enunciating were, it could be argued, the commonplaces of British and Irish political thinking. But whereas in the British Isles they were used to justify the revolution of 1688, in France they were being employed to open up a new era ... Liberals all over Europe were exhilarated at the prospect of reshaping society. (237)

The Irish newspapers provided every minute detail of French happenings. At the same time as the French revolution was getting under way, the Irish politics had also begun to stir. The king of Great Britain and Ireland, George III, went out of his mind, and it was agreed that the regent of Britain and Ireland should be installed in office. The Regency Crisis was initially a

medical one that was concerned with the constitution of the king, than it broadened out into ideological debates about the constitution of the state.

Grattan's fervent belief in the British connections was shown when he emphasized that the interests of England and Ireland were inseparable. This angered a young Protestant barrister, Theobald Wolfe Tone, who was beginning to take an interest in politics and called for the Catholic Emancipation. In 1782, the Irish obtained from Britain their own independent parliament in Dublin; the relief act of 1793, gave Catholics the right to vote. Abroad Britain was at war with France; at home (Ireland) there was much agrarian unrest because of tithe and rent. In Ulster, the competition for land led to the battle of the Diamond between the Protestants and the Catholics which in turn led to the formation of the Orange society (1795). The liberals (Whigs) led by Grattan demanded more concession to the Catholics.

The United Irishmen were determined to win Catholic emancipation, radical reform, and independence. The upholders of the existing order were equally determined to preserve law and order, maintain the connection with Great Britain and to resist French aggression. Neither side was prepared to yield. (244)