

A Model of Defiance: Reimagining the Comparative Analysis of Concealed Discourse in Text

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This paper proposes that texts produced in diverse oral-traditional environments exhibit similarities in their disguise of subversion, particularly social or political resistance to the status quo. The disguise used in a particular text reflects the relationship between the text and its referents, or the cultural environment in which the text is produced and used. Cross-textual similarities reflect the similar *processes* used to disguise subversive ideas. This paper explores the following questions: 1) How might a particular text have been used to disguise resistance to the dominant hegemony? 2) What is the nature of that resistance as it is presented in the text? 3) What comparisons might we find among textual disguises of resistance from various literatures? I introduce a new model for the comparative analysis of veiled discourse in text and then reflect briefly on what this analysis can tell us about the nature of the relationship between textual disguise and cultural environment. By encouraging us to map the relationship between textual features and their cultural referents, the model offers us a window into the human capacity to disguise subversive discourse in various forms, to innovate new ways of sharing information, and to renegotiate power relationships in what may otherwise seem to be a stable hegemony. That disguise processes may be similar in diverse cultural and textual traditions suggests interesting possibilities for our understanding of the role of authority (and author/ity) in human intellectual evolution.

The new model builds on political scientist James Scott's (1990) concept of "hidden resistance" and the "hidden transcripts" of subordinate cultures. But where Scott conceives of the hidden transcript as a figurative representation of the subordinate group's private communication within the public sphere, I have interpreted the concept of "transcript" more literally, querying how writing and text themselves might be used as a vehicle to preserve and transmit a concealed, subversive discourse. I am not the first to do so: scholars from various fields have applied Scott's ideas in their reading of texts for evidence of concealed discourse.¹ But I take the conversation in a new direction: the model I propose enables a comparative analysis of disguise processes across time and place. I argue that we can observe a set of universal—or, at least, pan-cultural—principles at work in the creation of textual disguise. By emphasizing how the disguise processes manipulate or utilize the relationship between a text and its oral-traditional referents, the model

¹For Scott's model applied in readings of various ancient texts, see particularly Horsley (2004a, 2004b), Kittredge (2004), Elliott (2004), and Boyarin (1995, 1998, 1999).

opens another window onto the relationship between oral tradition and written text and, potentially, the evolution of human intellectual development. I do not seek to suppress the dissimilarity among such diverse groups as those I discuss here, for example: the rabbinic sages, the Greek oral-traditional poets, and the Catholic peasantry of eighteenth-century Ireland. But insofar as these groups, and others, navigated environments that limited how they could express particular viewpoints without incurring the disapproval—or worse—of the dominant hegemony, we can recognize common features in the ways they employed writing and text to conceal certain ideas.

The study is informed by the work of John Miles Foley (1990 and 1999), who argues that “oral traditions work like languages, only more so” (1999:20), in that they are idiomatic and referential. The degree to which one understands the meaning of an oral tradition depends on the degree to which one is familiar with the tradition’s cultural context.

In view of this, any comparative analysis of literatures from diverse cultural environments is naturally limited due to the difficulty of drawing cross-genre comparisons (Foley 1990:3):

One simply cannot expect a cogent analysis to come out of a comparison of, for example, riddles and epics; the generic assumptions implicit in the forms must be at variance, and this variance seriously reduces, if not actually invalidates, the legitimacy of the proposed comparison.

Foley goes on to argue the importance of an analysis that respects “the principle of *genre-dependence*” (3), wherein comparison texts are, “as far as is feasible in separate poetic traditions, precisely the same genre” (8). A comparative analysis of diverse literatures that does not take into account the principle of *tradition-dependence*, or what Foley defines as the “respect for a given literature’s linguistic and prosodic integrity,” is similarly meaningless (4):

By counterposing Homeric phraseology to the diction of Old English, Old French, or whatever other poetry one chooses as comparand, without making adjustment for the individual characteristics of each poetry, one simply calculates the extent to which the compared work is composed of Homeric Greek formulas, obviously a useless index.

On the surface Foley’s arguments would seem to dissuade us from a comparison of distinct genres and traditions; I propose, however, that there is room for a meaningful analysis across genres and traditions if we consider the *function* of certain textual features within particular contexts. Where a particular feature seems to provide space within the text for the preservation of hidden discourse, we can examine how this function might be used in the process of disguise. A cross-textual comparison of these feature functions, and a dialogue that considers the possibility of parallel or similar processes of disguise, offers a window into the evolution of subversive discourse and human power relationships.

This study rests on the understanding that the manner and method of a text’s subversive discourse depend on the character of the relationship between human beings and the written word in a given time and place. Specifically, the nature of a textual disguise depends on the oral character of the culture that produces the text. In the three primary examples considered in this

paper, the audience's fluency in a particular oral-traditional "language" is necessary for complete understanding of the subtext. This fluency helps to ensure that the subversive discourse attracts little or no attention from the dominant group, and is understood as resistance only by likeminded individuals.

If we consider human beings' relationship with the written word from the perspective of the consequences of writing,² we might see the written word as either a tool of the tyrant, used in the domination or intimidation of individuals or groups, or a weapon of the weak, used to galvanize support for a political or social cause.³ But when we look for consequences, we risk overlooking the quiet narrative of writing and text. We may fail to recognize adequately the function of writing in the day-to-day life of an individual who lives in a time and place where social and political changes are not overt, where open revolt or rebellion is neither possible nor desirable, but where it may still be distasteful to silently and willingly accept the status quo without expressing resistance at all.

The capacity of text to conceal subversive ideas is in part due to what has been referred to as its "fixity": once a text is recorded in written form, it is "fixed" in a way that oral traditions are not.⁴ This fixity makes altering a written text a messy endeavor: the editor erases, rewrites, and appends, and always risks introducing errors into the original. But while fixity limits our ability to alter a text physically with the same ease with which we might alter an orally delivered narrative, the same fixity encourages increasingly complex interpretations: one can *layer* the fixed, written word with additional, hidden, meaning. Theoretically, one can imbue an individual written word with any number of abstract meanings that are not textually represented.⁵

The analytical model I propose is designed to reveal textual similarities not in the *nature* of political or social resistance but, rather, in the *processes* used by oral-traditional cultures to disguise these discourses. Oral traditional cultures, or cultures with a high degree of orality or Walter J. Ong's (1982) concept of "oral residue," may use quite similar techniques to disguise particular discourses in textual material, even though the precise relationship between text and oral traditions in each case is unique.

I identify three principles of disguise: *articulation*, by which a text hides secondary meaning through its use of diction and syntax, cloaking resistance beneath a veil of words; *construction*, by which a text disguises hidden transcripts or subversive meaning through narrative or textual structure; and *diversion*, by which a text obfuscates subversive meaning by

²For this determinative view of writing see, for example, Goody (1977 and 1987), Goody and Watt (1968), and Havelock (1982 and 1986).

³It arguably functioned this way in the Reformation, the French Revolution, and Nazi-occupied France. Cf. French playwright Jean Anouilh's *Antigone* (1954), first performed in 1943. The play transforms the classic Greek story into a subversive political commentary on Nazi power. See also Steiner (1994) and Scott (1985).

⁴The idea that writing has negative effects on human communication due to its fixity can be traced through history. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato expresses concern that writing has a negative impact on memory and intelligence (275a). In 2 Corinthians 3:6, Paul states, "[T]he letter killeth, but the spirit [that is, breath] giveth life." Consider Foucault's (1970 and 1977) argument that writing "kills" the author.

⁵This is not to suggest that this sort of multi-layered, abstract symbolic meaning is not also possible in a wholly oral-traditional context. Rather, the fixed nature of a canonized text *demand*s a fluid interpretive approach to ensure the text remains relevant as the world in which it was created changes over time.

focusing audience attention elsewhere—much like the magician’s sleight of hand.⁶ As a test case, I will apply the three-principle model in a reading of a tractate in the Babylonian Talmud, a compendium of rabbinic oral tradition (c. 550-600 CE), using Daniel Boyarin’s (1995) discussion of veiled subversion in the Talmudic martyr narratives. I then undertake a comparison reading of other oral-derived literature. In this paper, I consider hidden discourse in Homer’s oral epic *The Odyssey* (c. seventh century BCE) and *Castle Rackrent* (1800), an eighteenth-century novel by Irish writer Maria Edgeworth.⁷

Subversive Discourse in the Babylonian Talmud

According to rabbinic tradition, God revealed two religious “texts” at Mt. Sinai: the written Torah, and the “oral torah,” a vast corpus of oral-traditional scriptural exegesis, folk narrative, law, and commentary—in written form a total of several thousand pages longer than the Torah itself. In the *Mishnah*, the oldest portion of the oral tradition (c. 200 CE), God tells Moses and his descendants to preserve the oral torah in memory and to transmit it to each successive generation by word of mouth.

By the end of the first century BCE, the Near East was largely Hellenized; for many Jews, Greek was the language of daily life. Most members of the Jewish population experienced the biblical texts in an oral-performative mode, as the text was read aloud in the Temple on the Sabbath and on holidays. The oral presentation of the written Torah was frequently accompanied by orally delivered and (often) memorized interpretative traditions and exegetical discussion.⁸

When the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, the Jews lost for the second time in cultural memory their social, geographical, religious, and political center.⁹ Jews who had together experienced the physicality of the Temple space were once more linked only by their common memory of it. The one remaining symbolic and physical cultural link the Jews had with each other—the Torah—was potentially a tenuous one: the written law required meticulous preservation and interpretation. Eventually, the interpretative tradition was so lengthy and

⁶For a comprehensive presentation of the model and its applications, see Shoichet (2010). The terms I use—*articulation*, *construction*, and *diversion*—are merely descriptive, and the features they reference need not be limited to those found in oral-traditional material. Nor should these three principles be seen as definitive; there may be other principles of disguise. The model presented here serves as a starting point for comparative analysis and discussion.

⁷The three examples discussed in this paper do not represent a random sample of oral-derived literature. They have been chosen particularly for their capacity to illustrate all elements of the model as it is presented here. Other literatures may illustrate these elements to a greater or lesser degree, or even require that the model be modified in scope or specificity in order to support a meaningful comparative analysis.

⁸See Niditch (1996), who points out that the biblical texts give us an insight into a world that, though highly literate, was shaped by oral-cultural tradition, and in which one’s experience of a text was thus determined largely by the oral-traditional environment in which one lived.

⁹One of the primary sources for the final years and destruction of the Second Temple is Josephus’ *The Jewish War*. See also Shalit (1972:251-53). Though *The Jewish War* is the most comprehensive “contemporary-witness” account available, there are various discrepancies between Josephus’ version of events and other accounts.

cumbersome that it was written down, recorded in its final form as what is known today as the Talmud, likely in the early sixth century CE.¹⁰ But as Mikliszanski argues (1945:437):

. . . the change was rather of an external character; the text that was conceived and developed in spoken words remained practically the same . . . The ancient prohibition against writing down the oral law is still stressed in the written texts of the present Talmud; the written form is only, if one may say, a mnemonic device so that the text should not be forgotten.¹¹

There is little evidence to suggest that the scholars of the great rabbinic academies of Babylonia were well versed in the scribal arts; writing played an important but marginal role in the academies (Elman and Gershoni 2000:6).¹² Referring to written material during legal and theological discussions would have been awkward given the rapid repartée of rabbinic debates and the unwieldy form of written documents at the time. The oral torah, on the other hand, was “imprinted on the memory ready formulated, . . . kept alive by constant repetition” (Gerhardsson 1998 [1961]:81). That the rabbis structured their interpretations in dialogue form suggests that this was the form most likely to be remembered, nurtured, and transmitted.¹³ Debates were fiercely competitive, conducted aloud in front of a learned audience; emphasis was placed on a rabbi’s skill in immediate response—which demanded that he retrieve from memory the talmudic and Scriptural passages that supported his argument.¹⁴ When there was doubt about the wording of a particular passage, a group of highly skilled “repeaters” (*tannaim*) would be called in to

¹⁰ There are actually two versions of the Talmud in existence today: the Palestinian Talmud, or the *Yerushalmi*, and the Babylonian Talmud, or the *Bavli*. The texts are similar in subject matter, likely derived from the same source material. The latter includes more anonymously authored (or, at least, unattributed) material, is more poetic, and is considered to be the standard, forming the basis for much of contemporary Jewish law. See Halivni 1986, Rubenstein 2003.

¹¹ See also Gerhardsson (1998 [1961]:81), who discusses the inherent awkwardness of the Talmud as a written text, with its meticulous preservation of oral-formulaic language and structure.

¹² Elman (1999:53) uses the term “pervasive orality” to describe the era of Babylonian rabbinism, in which reading was common and writing was known, but neither played an important role daily life. There is still significant debate about how much the form of the Talmud is indicative of an (older) oral style or of its oral composition and transmission. For the purposes of this study, I presume that the written form of the Talmud belies the oral culture of the fifth- and sixth-century rabbinic academies. This view is supported by the observations of Mandel (2000:77).

¹³ See Lightstone (1994:10) and Neusner (1994:186).

¹⁴ Citing Ong’s (1982) observations of the essentially “agonist” nature of oral societies, Rubenstein (2003:62) suggests that the hostile environment of the rabbinic academy was due in part to its emphasis on oral dialectic and debate. For discussion of the relationship between violence and oral culture, see Ong (1982:43-46).

recite the oral text from memory.¹⁵ Memory rather than writing was ultimately seen as the more flexible and reliable aid to study.¹⁶

As an interpretive tool, the Talmud is less interested in arriving at solutions than exploring the dialectic process itself. Arguments seem contrived in order to satisfy style or structure requirements rather than to contribute new material or to arrive at any certain conclusion. Rubenstein (2003:3) suggests that “spurious questions” and “forced answers” act more as “literary devices to emphasize aspects of the debate” rather than as valid discussions of points of law. Neusner (1994:203) argues that it “is not that the [Babylonian Talmud’s] framers are uninterested in conclusions and outcome . . . the deep structure of reason is the goal.” Frequently, the rabbis seem more comfortable leaving things unresolved: “in the course of a talmudic discussion, an argument that threatens to resolve a controversy is considered a difficulty [*kushia*], while one that restores the controversy itself is called a solution [*terutz*]!” (Boyarin 1995:27)

Ultimately it was not the individual sage who wielded authoritative power but rather the “community of Rabbis” that debated *halakhic* (“legal”) matters and decided on an interpretive direction (Boyarin 1985:27).¹⁷ But in its presentation of diverse and often conflicting opinions and interpretations, the Talmud arguably canonizes dissent and preserves for posterity a unique process of inquiry. The dissenting voice continues to inform later discussion; unresolved arguments are retained in their unresolved state, suggesting that the rabbis viewed the inquiry as ongoing and a dissenting voice as having an inherent value in its capacity to guide or inform, despite the fact (or, perhaps, *because of* the fact) that it presents an alternative point of view: there may be a time and place in the future for new understanding of old arguments.¹⁸

Arguably, this dialectic blueprint enabled the rabbis to preserve and transmit a particular political and social philosophy—of both accommodation and resistance to authority. This “hidden transcript” was in a language that its oppressors either did not know or did not know well. The nature of the message is partly embedded within the structural framework of the text and is therefore not wholly discernible to one who studies only the *content* of the text. At the same time, the content of the text itself is layered with meanings in addition to the denotative; one’s understanding of a given passage thus depends on one’s familiarity with other talmudic

¹⁵ See Mandel (2000:76) and Rubenstein (2003:62).

¹⁶ See Rubenstein (2003:62). Elman also points to “the overwhelming likelihood that [the] legal material [of the Babylonian Talmud] (about two-thirds of the total) was orally transmitted, and that the analytical and dialectical redactional layer, perhaps 55% of the Babylonian Talmud . . . was also orally composed. This long period of oral transmission and composition took place against a backdrop of what I shall term ‘pervasive orality’ in Babylonia” (1999:52, 53).

¹⁷ Even a rabbi with a dissenting opinion may advise following the direction indicated by the collective majority, despite the fact that the oral torah’s preservation of his singular view grants it a certain merit. See, for example, *Mishnah* Eduyyot 5:7.

¹⁸ The Talmud is not a collection of all possible arguments; it is a heavily (re)edited, (re)interpreted and (re)annotated anthology of commentary. We should not assume that the “dissent” preserved within the pages of the Talmud is there *solely for the purpose of preserving dissent* (or, indeed, that it is *actual* dissent rather than a manufactured artifice of dissent). Instead we might ask: How does the relationship of these dissenting voices to the surrounding dialogue contribute to the whole?

material and with contemporary social and cultural symbols within the context of the Babylonian rabbinic environment.¹⁹

Talmudic scholar Daniel Boyarin (1995) has interpreted tractate Avodah Zarah in the Babylonian Talmud using Scott's hidden-transcripts model.

When Rabbi Eliezer was arrested [by the Romans] for sectarianism, they took him up to the place of judgment [*gradus*]. The judge [*hegemon*] said to him: "An elder such as you, has dealing with these foolish things?!" He [Eliezer] said: "I have trust in the J/judge." The judge thought that he was speaking about him, but he was speaking about his Father in heaven. He [the judge] said: "Since you have declared your faith in me, you are free [*dimus*]." ²⁰

At another point in the tractate:

They brought Rabbi Hanina the son of Teradyon, and said to him: "Why did you engage in Torah?" He said to them: "For thus the Lord my God has commanded me!"

They immediately sentenced him to burning, and his wife to execution [by the sword], and his daughter to sit in a prostitute's booth.²¹

Boyarin argues that Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Elazar avoid angering the Romans by using duplicitous language and action to transmit disguised information to their contemporaries. By engaging in word and logic play, the two rabbis satisfy the Romans that they are "innocent" (of the charges of sectarianism) and their followers that they are "guilty" (of worshipping a Jewish God and teaching Torah). The Romans understand one meaning by the rabbis' words and actions; the rabbinic audience understands a different meaning by the same words and actions.

In contrast, Rabbi Hanina uses no trickster language. His frank defiance of the Romans and his declaration of obedience to a Jewish God are arguably honorable: his declaration that he "occupies" himself with Torah because "thus God has commanded me!" is comparable to the Christian martyr's "*Christianus sum!*" Yet when the Hanina narrative is read in conjunction with other Talmudic passages, particularly other martyr narratives, its meaning is ambiguous. Hanina's declaration not only seals his own fate but also condemns his wife to execution and his daughter to prostitution: the audience now questions the "honor" of his declaration. Moreover, the account of Hanina's sentencing follows immediately upon accounts of witty escapes from similar fates and thus by comparison seems even harsher: we now question the wisdom of his declaration. The Talmud refers to the fate of Hanina as a punishment, not as an honourable event:

¹⁹ For more on the political program of the rabbis, see, Biale (1986). For more on the multilayered meaning of the talmudic writings, see Lightstone (1994), Neusner (1994), Boyarin, (1995, 1998, and 1999). I have argued elsewhere (Shoichet 2010) that the meaning of oral-traditional texts, or texts composed within highly oral-traditional environments, must be located and understood within the context of the environment in which they are composed and/or used.

²⁰ Translation by Boyarin (1997:12).

²¹ Translation by Boyarin (1999:56).

now we question whether the Talmud itself approves of Hanina's words. Finally, the narrative seems to suggest that to teach Torah in public, in flagrant defiance of the law of the land, would be as much an affront to God as it would have been to the Romans: now we question whether the Talmud approves of Hanina's actions.

Arguably, the narrative of Rabbi Hanina *on its own* presents little opportunity for a hidden transcript of subversive discourse. But when it is viewed as a single thread in the larger tapestry of the Talmud, we see a very different meaning, one accessible only to those aware of the textual environment of the Talmud and the role these narratives might play within the wider rabbinic culture. While Hanina may represent the Jewish equivalent of the Christian martyr (displaying the fortitude and honesty attributed to Christian martyrs of the time), it is also possible that Hanina serves as a warning to those who inhabit an environment in which the dominant group exacts punishment for unacceptable behaviour, and in which the narrative culture of the subordinate group venerates the trickster, preserving and interpreting for future generations these tales of cunning and intellect.²²

Boyarin highlights one other "hidden transcript" within the text, one that illuminates Rabbi Eliezer's possible un-rabbinic leanings. The phrase translated by Boyarin as "arrested for sectarianism" could just as easily be translated as "arrested *by* sectarianism"²³—that is, intellectually or spiritually transfixed by Christianity. Arguably, one of the hidden transcripts embedded within the Talmud may point to at least one rabbi's affinity for early Christian teachings.

From Boyarin's reading, we can argue that subversive meaning in the martyr narratives is disguised using methods that exploit the relationship between the written text and the oral-traditional culture of the rabbinic world. First, word play in the Eliezer narrative suggests two very different political meanings—one meaning satisfies the Roman *hegemon* and secures Rabbi Eliezer's release from custody; the other indicates to the rabbi's followers that he rejects the *hegemon's* authority and instead places his trust in God. (Another possible interpretation of the same passage suggests not only the rabbi's essential distrust of both the Roman judge *and* God when it comes to determining a fair and appropriate fate for human beings but also his greater faith in his own wits to determine a favourable outcome.) This example illustrates the new model's first principle of textual disguise, *articulation*, whereby subversion is concealed through the duplicitous use of diction and syntax (including double entendre, word play, and multiple "extratextual" meanings layered onto a fixed text). Using this principle, one or more politically subversive meanings can be hidden "in full view" of the dominant group, enabling members of a subjugated population to engage in the sort of information exchange that may not otherwise have been tolerated in an open forum.

Second, the textual structure of the tractate also presents opportunities for the disguise of subversive ideas. Using the principle of *construction*, a discrete passage can suggest one meaning when it is read or heard in isolation from other passages or texts but another (often quite different) meaning when it is read or understood in conjunction with other episodes, or as an

²² Possibly the Talmud also makes a statement here about the value of martyrdom in general, Christian martyrdom in particular.

²³ The prepositional prefix *b'* in Hebrew has multiple meanings.

element of the textual structure as a whole. This structural obfuscation enables users of the text to discuss the text openly. A scholar who is intimately familiar with the composition of the Talmud as a whole understands the meaning of a particular episode within this larger framework; those who do not know the Talmud in this way (Jews and non-Jews alike) are not likely to have this insight or to be able to fully engage in interpretative dialectic.

Third, the martyr narratives devote much time and space to detail: how the rabbis respond publicly to the accusations made against them, the personal conversations they engage in with each other and with their colleagues, and, in Hanina's case, the grisly details of his execution. Elsewhere in the Talmud, there are similarly extensive discussions of ostensibly finicky narrative details, or of *halakha* (religious law). From this, one could understand a primary meaning of the martyr episodes to be the historical and narrative details of the rabbis' arrests or the resolution of minutiae. I propose, however, that these details operate according to the third principle of disguise: the *diversion*, or deliberate misdirection away from subversive meaning by focusing audience attention on other elements of the text. By seeming to focus on details, the Talmud gives the impression to the uninformed audience that its primary meaning is in these details. An audience familiar with the nature of Talmudic discourse and the environment in which this dialogue takes place (both as historical commentary and as a tool for the contemporary study of *halakha*) will recognize a more complex and subversive meaning.

Subversive Discourse in Homer's Odyssey

The three principles of disguise are not unique to the concealment of hidden discourse in the Talmud. A critical reading of Homer's *Odyssey* suggests that Homer makes use of the same three principles in order to present an idea of feminine agency that would likely not have been acceptable to all members of his audience. From this reading, it is possible to propose how Homer conceives of female resistance to political and social structures in ancient Greece and—as illustrated in the case of Penelope—what resources might be available to Greek women who desired to manipulate social or political circumstances to their advantage.

In the ancient world, Homer's fictionalized account of the events following the Trojan War was likely performed in front of an audience, at least in part for the purposes of entertainment. Where the Talmud is primarily a warehouse of legal arguments, rules, and narrative illustrations, the *Odyssey* is a cohesive narrative and performative whole, with a cast of characters who engage in complex interactions with each other. The epic may function as a “warehouse” of cultural information,²⁴ but if so, this is not billed as the poet's primary purpose.

Yet both texts are “oral,” in that they were composed within a primarily oral context and recorded in writing sometime after they were composed. It is generally agreed that the earliest versions of both texts were used or performed—and therefore received by the audience—in oral-traditional environments where written texts (and literacy) were still rare. While both have been edited significantly as texts, they both retain oral-traditional characteristics and can be

²⁴ See Eric Havelock (1982 and 1986), who calls the Greek epic a memory storage “warehouse” in the context of Greek oral poetry.

understood best if we view them as reflections of an oral tradition rather than wholly literary texts.²⁵ At the same time, both texts are presented as records of historical events and people. We may understand these people and events to be somewhat fictionalized (perhaps contemporary audiences did as well), but they are not presented as fictions *per se*. Rather, they are presented as the authors' interpretation—or their orally transmitted “memories”—of history.²⁶

In the ancient world, Greek women were valued most highly for their obedience, their fidelity, their modesty, their industriousness, their diligence in fulfilling filial duty, and their ability to manage a household; the act of weaving and the tools of weaving came to symbolize these qualities, and the process and products of wool-working (carding, spinning, weaving, the loom, and the distaff) were often seen as symbols of femininity. Attic vases frequently depicted women holding spindles, “which were confused or interchangeable in these portraits with hand-held mirrors” (Kruger 2001:151), both traditional representations of femininity.²⁷ In many examples, the female body is sexualized; the loom and distaff become symbolic not only of women's beauty and charm but also of a woman's desirability and of her own sexual appetites (Kruger 2001:53). Arguably this, coupled with the suitability of weaving as a mode of signification, made weaving a powerful communicative tool, particularly for those with little social power. Textile production offered women a forum for the expression of ideas, convictions, desires, and resistance within what was generally a fairly rigid, patriarchal social system.²⁸ Weaving enabled the weaver to “voice” a narrative or deliver a message (or, by committing the action of weaving, allude to her power to do so) with a greater degree of autonomy and creativity than she might otherwise have had.

This powerful metaphor for creation is associated almost wholly with the socially “inferior” half of the species—resulting in an intriguing and provocative juxtaposition. Already women represent the mysterious creative force of childbirth; as spinners and weavers, women potentially wield, metaphorically at least, all the powers of the Fates.

²⁵ Scholars have catalogued “characteristics” of oral-traditional literature in the cultures of both ancient Greece and the biblical and rabbinic worlds. See particularly Lord (1960), Foley (1999), Thomas (1992), Havelock (1982 and 1986) and Kirk (1976) for oral tradition in Greece; Elman (1999), Elman and Gershoni (2000), Gerhardsson (1998 [1961]), Jaffee (2001) and Niditch (1996) for oral characteristics in the biblical and rabbinic traditions.

²⁶ In an oral-traditional context, where an account of history amounts to what is remembered and transmitted orally, the details that survive are likely those details that remain culturally relevant. The concept of accuracy as we understand it may be of little importance, not least because it becomes increasingly difficult to judge the relative merits of two differing oral renditions of the same event. Herodotus contends frequently that he records the version most likely to be the “true” one, based on his own judgment of the information. Yet he often includes the “untrue” versions as well, frequently in far more descriptively lurid detail than the “true” version. I argue, as others have done, that these untrue accounts include some important version of truth (Gr. *aletheia*) that the so-called “true” record lacks. On the relationship of *aletheia* to memory and history, see Flory (1987), Gill and Wiseman (1993), and Shrimpton (1997). See also Goody and Wilks (1968) and Shrimpton (2006).

²⁷ See also Jamin (2001:1), who discusses the relationship between a woman's completion of household tasks and her value.

²⁸ Weaving is not always wholly a woman's domain, either as a physical activity or as a metaphor for other action. In various ancient societies, men wove textiles. See, for example, Elizabeth Wayland Barber's (1994:259-61) discussion of Egyptian male weavers. In the *Odyssey*, both women and men “weave” plans or spin “webs” of deceit, and the ancient Greek poet story-teller—frequently male—“weaves” the threads of his narrative together.

From this perspective, we see how the symbolic power of weaving also lends itself to the subversion of the traditional representations of feminine virtue. When a female character displays traits in direct conflict with traditional feminine virtues, and yet is *also* depicted as weaving, then the symbolic meaning of the activity changes: weaving can also symbolize virtue's "opposite."

Once weaving has been established as a metaphor for deceit as well as virtue (just as the material woven on a loom has a "right" side and a "wrong" side), then Penelope can no longer be interpreted as purely virtuous. Even the meaning of the weaving metaphor itself is ambiguous: Penelope's weaving of Laertes' shroud suggests at once both her virtuous fidelity to Odysseus and her deception of the suitors.²⁹

At the same time, in a society where women have little opportunity to voice their opinions or concerns in a public forum, "textiles represent a text inscribed with a personal and/or political message;" a weaver may use her craft to uphold dominant patriarchal ideology if that is what she supports, but "if she is not a confederate of the dominant culture her textile will unmask these signs [of a patriarchal society] and represent them as marks of tyranny" (Kruger 2001:23). In this way a virtuous activity such as domestic textile production becomes a potent tool of personal and political expression—and potentially a tool for political resistance to the dominant ideology (13).³⁰

Using the symbolic power of the weaving metaphor, Homer bestows upon various female characters in the *Odyssey* the power to manipulate the lives of others.³¹ This move on the part of Homer invites an exploration of the relationship between male social authority and female power, not only as presented in the *Odyssey* but also as it suggests aspects of the social and political environment of Homer's Greece.³² Some women wielded considerable power to effect social change, despite appearances to the contrary. This power had to be wielded in a clandestine

²⁹ See Pantelia's (1993) discussion on the symbolic differences of various types of wool-working in the *Odyssey*: When women must preserve or protect domestic order, they weave; when the threat to domestic order abates, they spin.

³⁰ Ultimately, Kruger admits, even Penelope's weaving "cannot change patriarchal society or her place in it. Weaving as process can only negotiate for her a space, and time, until she can be properly re-accommodated into this society as Odysseus's wife" (2001:57). But this view does not consider the possibility that Penelope's aim all along has been to retain her autonomy while she orchestrates circumstances so that her husband—a man whom she is both in love with and irritated by—can resume his position when he returns, without getting himself killed in the process. If we read Penelope in this way, then her skill in manipulating the potentially destructive yet powerful force of the male ego becomes apparent. She pits the suitors against each other by leading them all on (*Od.* 2.83-110). She embarrasses Telemachus in front of the other suitors, ensuring that he forcefully asserts his status as the master of the house in public, in front of both his suitors and his disguised father (*Od.* 21.343-53). (Is this also Penelope's way of demonstrating to Odysseus her formidable capabilities as a single parent and his own superfluosity as head of the house? After all, as the next master of the household, Telemachus seems not to have suffered at all from the absence of a father figure.) Finally, she manipulates Odysseus into admitting his identity in Book 23 by threatening his ego with intimations of her infidelity (174-204).

³¹ In addition to Penelope, both Circe and Kalypso have this power. Athena, the consummate goddess of weaving, dresses both herself and other characters in disguise, and weaves deception in order to achieve the narrative outcome that Homer desires.

³² Recent scholarship on the textualization of oral epics (Honko 2001) and the role of the "mental text" in the preservation and transmission of oral traditions has reinvigorated discussions about the identity of Homer, which in turn call into question the origins of Penelope's resistance. Arguably any resistance we find encoded in the *Odyssey* may not be the product of a single poet or group of poets but, rather, of an entire oral-traditional *culture*.

and deceptive manner, however, as its existence was not openly acknowledged. Pantelia (1993) argues that we can understand weaving in the *Odyssey* as symbolic of how a woman maintains domestic order amidst threat or chaos by creating order from disorder, weaving together discrete elements into something new and whole. In some cases the success and maintenance of order may require deception.³³

If we read the *Odyssey* as a “story about Mediterranean social practices” as Winkler does (1990:143), then we cannot fail to recognize that Homer has given Penelope a remarkable amount of power within the confines of the narrative: the plot hinges on whether she chooses to wait for Odysseus’s return or to marry one of the suitors, both of which, arguably, she is within her rights to do—as Odysseus’s wife, to await his homecoming and preserve the stability of his household, and as Odysseus’s widow, to take another husband. We gain a clearer insight into Penelope’s character, and into Homer’s understanding of the potential for female social and political strategy, if we seriously examine “the power and intelligence [that] are hers” (143), even given the limited environment in which she operates. The scene of the marriage bed, below, is the symbolic culmination of Penelope’s subversive politics.

Circumspect Penelope said to him in answer:

“You are so strange. I am not being proud, nor indifferent
nor puzzled beyond need, but I know very well what you looked like
when you went in the ship with the sweeping oars, from Ithaka.
Come then, Eurykleia, and make up a firm bed for him
outside the well-fashioned chamber: that very bed that he himself
built. Put the firm bed here outside for him, and cover it
over with fleeces and blankets, and with shining coverlets.”

So she spoke to her husband, trying him out . . .³⁴

In *Homer’s Traditional Art* (1999), Foley examines patterns of oral-traditional signification. The repetitive, formulaic diction and structure of oral traditions tend to draw our attention away from the fact that, unlike a living, spoken vernacular (6):

. . . oral traditions tend to employ focused varieties of language (or registers), . . . customarily [sacrificing] the broad applicability of general-purpose language in order to do fewer things well. In this respect they are usually more densely idiomatic and resonant than everyday registers.”

³³ Cf. Levaniouk (2008:19), who suggests that Penelope’s deceptive tactics indicate that “sometimes flexibility and variation are a requirement of continuity.” Her weaving and unweaving of Laertes’ shroud, for example, is intended to preserve Telemachus’ inheritance.

³⁴ *Od.* 23.173-81. The translation used throughout this paper is by Richmond Lattimore.

In the Homeric poems one word or phrase may “resonate” with multiple meanings, drawn from historical and contemporary Greek contexts; an audience member fluent in this language will understand at least a range of these culturally specific meanings.³⁵

The meaning of an oral tradition, argues Foley (1999:6-7), is determined by the audience as much as it is by the poet, perhaps even more so—for when the referential advantage of traditional language is lost (that is, when the audience is no longer fluent in the cultural and idiomatic meanings layered by the poet onto individual words, phrases or scenes), then the poet must change his composition in order to get his meaning across. When we consider Homer’s *Odyssey* from the point of view of the audience, meaning is generated on two levels: first, the referential, which Foley calls meaning “behind the signs,” referring to idiomatic, culturally specific meaning not immediately apparent in the literal sense of the word or phrase, and second, the situational, which Foley dubs as meaning “between the signs,” referring to the “local, immediate, and individual details that are full partners in the negotiation of Homeric art” (7). Between-the-signs meaning is generated by the textual, situation-specific use of the word, phrase, or scene in the context of the narrative itself, though not discounting the meaning that the word or phrase or scene might have for the poetic characters in the textual situation—meaning which may itself be generated by extratextual referentiality, or “behind-the-signs” meaning. Both types of meaning are important (6-7): “The art of the . . . *Odyssey* stems not solely from the uniqueness of the instant nor solely from its traditional meaning, but rather from their interaction.”

Foley’s model is based on the Greek concept of *sêma* (pl. *sêmata*). The term has wide application in ancient Greece, and is used loosely to mean something understood to stand for something else. Thus, a *sêma* could be a prophecy or an omen, tombs or burial mounds, Odysseus’s scar, or the marriage bed of Odysseus and Penelope in the excerpt above. The meaning of the *sêma* depends on the audience’s intimate understanding of the “immanent tradition, without which [the *sêmata*] are empty signifiers, mere parts without their implied wholes”; to the ancient Greeks, then, “*sêmata* amount to signals or tokens of impending realities, realities that can be apprehended if—and only if—one knows the code” (Foley 1996:27).

It is this awareness that enables us to read the character of Penelope and her everyday activity of weaving as suggestive of female social resistance within a rigid patriarchy—not necessarily as Homer’s condemnation or commendation of such resistance but rather as his reflection of it, along the lines of “This is how a woman might resist social or political pressure within the context of an ancient Greek patriarchy, and this is how that resistance may be construed as something else.” The *sêma* of weaving is also indicative of Homer’s deft poetic manipulation. Not only does he weave deception in the context of the narrative, but he also uses the text to disguise the true intentions of Penelope. Ultimately, the nature of her resistance to the role ascribed for her remains concealed beneath a complex layer of *sêmata*, all of which require the audience’s fluency in the language of traditional referentiality being used but which contradict each other and thus enable the nature of Penelope’s resistance to remain concealed and inscrutable.

³⁵ See also Wienker-Piepho (2001:151): “The oral-traditional background of the texts provides the ‘natural background,’ against which each individual act of the Homeric epics, however unique it may appear, takes place.”

Homer's depiction of Penelope reflects his conception of how a woman might manipulate a rigid patriarchal social system to satisfy her personal goals. Viewed in this way, Penelope is a symbol of female resistance to male domination—a resistance that takes place in such a subtle manner that it can be concealed as acquiescence to patriarchal norms, or at the very least, understood as such by the men whose real social authority would be suspect if women's actions were interpreted differently. The cleverness of Homer's presentation is that it can be read either way—Penelope's actions can be interpreted as wholly supportive of Odysseus and the patrilineal order of his household, or they can be interpreted as Penelope's rejection of the role she is expected to play. She is not simply a grieving widow or a protective mother or a loyal wife or a devoted daughter-in-law. She has been for all intents and purposes the autonomous ruler of a wealthy and powerful household for close to two decades. She now faces the challenge of retaining power and wealth for a husband who may no longer be alive, or for a son who is not yet of an age that he can protect himself from enemies who perceive him as a direct threat. She must do this from her relatively powerless social position as a woman, without seeming to upset the natural social order or to jeopardize the social standing of the men in her life.

Traditionally Penelope has been read by literary critics as *either* a loyal wife devoted to preserving the household of her husband *or* an individual who wields a significant degree of power over the people around her and to some extent orchestrates the outcome of events. The primary difference between the two readings is one of agency: How much power does Penelope actually have over people and events? The answer depends to a large extent on how much we think Penelope knows. If she suspects the beggar is Odysseus (long before the revelation scene in Book 23), then arguably all her actions from this point are calculated to achieve a particular outcome (Murnaghan 1994:78-79): “[I]f Penelope is acting with knowledge of what she is doing, then she has some control over her situations” and “knowingly cooperates in [Odysseus's] success.” If Penelope is completely ignorant of Odysseus's identity, then she is “limited by her position in a patriarchal system,” an “unwitting accomplice” in Odysseus's plan (78-79).

By presenting two possible versions of Penelope, and providing sufficient material to justify either interpretation, Homer effectively “tells two stories at once” (78): the audience can choose to view Penelope as Odysseus's “unwitting accomplice” or as his willing, strategic partner. The two versions of Penelope together serve to disguise Homer's presentation of feminine resistance. Homer's socially acceptable, virtuously feminine Penelope serves to conceal a second Penelope, *sêma* of female deceit and subversion of the patriarchal order. This duplicitous, subversive Penelope uses the *kleos* of the virtuous, feminine Penelope to further her agenda without drawing unfavorable attention to herself, or to Homer as author of the subversive discourse.³⁶ In this way, the poet presents an unconventional or socially objectionable idea of

³⁶ The similarities between Foley's (1999) application of *sêmata* and the three principles of disguise are limited, not least because the *sêmata* as Foley presents them are not intended by the ancient author as purposeful disguises of subversive or hidden meanings; rather, they reflect the oral register in use within the cultural context. The meanings associated with this oral register may serve to suggest the deeper cultural, social, and political meaning of the oral tradition within the oral-traditional environment rather than to subvert social or political ideology. The principles of disguise, on the other hand, are *often* used intentionally to conceal expressions of resistance that could compromise the author or his audience if they were understood by those individuals or groups that had a vested interest in ensuring that subversive meanings and intentions were not preserved or transmitted.

“woman” while at the same time directing audience attention away from the unconventional Penelope toward the more conventional version.

Homer has no cause to conceal or otherwise disguise the “unwitting accomplice” Penelope; she displays the qualities considered to be indicative of feminine virtue. Even when she attempts to deceive the suitors, arguably she does so in the interests of preserving the social and political position of her husband and family. On the other hand, Homer *does* have reason to disguise the “strategic partner” Penelope, for though she uses deception to preserve Odysseus’ power, she also deceives her husband by concealing her suspicions about his identity. Arguably, this Penelope is not simply duplicitous in service to her husband and family but also uses deception to establish her own agency, both as wife of Odysseus and as queen of Ithaka. The longer she maintains this deception, the more likely she will be able to force Odysseus to admit his vulnerability (his jealousy and his political and social need of her) and to reveal his identity to her in a manner of her own choosing. Perhaps even more importantly, her deception enables her to exact a particular revenge on her husband—for his long absence, his public deception of her, and his lack of trust. In deceiving Odysseus, Penelope is arguably even more calculating than Odysseus, effectively proving herself to be the greater “master” of disguise. This discourse of feminine power is disguised by Homer in ways that can be understood according to the three-principle model of disguise.

In the *Odyssey*, words associated with the act of weaving (and woven material itself) signal both womanly virtue and feminine deceit. The *sêma* of weaving thus serves to symbolize (among other things) both versions of Penelope: the virtuous wife who weaves cloth as one of her daily domestic activities in service of the family, and the clever deceiver who weaves wiles in order to preserve order in the household.³⁷ But Homer’s deceptive, yet virtuous Penelope hides an even more deceptive Penelope: one who “weaves” time and events in a manner that benefits herself first, her family and household second. Homer’s multifaceted Penelope thus illustrates the principle of *articulation*. Ultimately, by associating her so closely with the act of weaving (and by his frequent mention of her loom), Homer casts Penelope as an author—of her own destiny and of the destinies of other characters in the poem, and thus on some level of the poem itself.³⁸ At the same time, by dressing Penelope in the clothing of the virtuous-yet-ignorant wife, Homer successfully disguises this presentation of female social and political power from those who do not wish to see it.

³⁷ Foley (1999) understands *sêma* to mean more than simply a sign or symbol that suggests to the characters and to the audience additional or alternative realities within the bounds of the narrative itself. A *sêma* may also be any sign to the audience of alternative realities *beyond* the limits of the oral traditional performance. Such signs are not limited to the traditional *sêmata* in epic poetry, such as dreams or prophecies. Words, phrases, typical scenes, and narrative patterns may also “resonate” with meanings drawn from various other historical and contemporary Greek contexts, and thus act effectively as *sêmata*. Audience members fluent in the language of oral-traditional *sêmata* will understand not only their meaning within the world inhabited by the characters of the poem but also their relation to events or circumstances in the contemporary world. For extended discussions on the role of weaving and female social power in ancient Greece, and Penelope in this context, see Cohen (1995), Kruger (2001), Marquardt (1993), Murnaghan (1994), Pantelia (1993), and Winkler (1990).

³⁸ Arguably Penelope’s role as “author” is simply one more element “authored” by Homer himself. But the fact that Homer *casts* Penelope in this role is indicative of how he views the potential capacity of Penelope—and perhaps of women generally—to orchestrate events to her advantage, despite her seemingly restrictive social position.

The two versions of Penelope are also key to recognizing subversive elements in the scene of the marriage bed in Book 23, a scene that Foley would argue falls within the parameters of a typical scene *sêma* (that is, a “recognition scene” typical of oral traditions) and which I argue illustrates the principle of *construction*. Prior to the marriage bed scene, Penelope professes to be still unsure of Odysseus’s true identity, despite the fact that Telemachus, Eurykleia, and Odysseus himself have all assured her that the beggar is indeed her husband. She is accused by them of being “mistrustful” (*O.* 23.72) and “harsh” (*O.*23.97), of having a “hard heart” (*O.*23.97) and a “stubborn spirit” (*O.*23.100). Odysseus alludes to her delicate femininity, suggesting that it is his rough appearance that turns her off (*O.*23.114-16). But it is when Penelope orders Eurykleia to set up a “firm bed” for him *outside* her bedroom—let it be “that very bed that he himself built” (*O.*23.178-79)—that the power in the narrative shifts most dramatically. Penelope knows, and she knows that Odysseus knows, that the bed is created from the trunk of an olive tree that grows up through the centre of the room—and could not have been moved by Penelope alone; Odysseus accuses her of having moved it with the help of a lover. With his accusation (which belies his insecurity), Penelope has won the game, tricking him into revealing his identity while divulging nothing about herself. In this way subversive meaning is hidden by the narrative structure of the poem, wherein the two versions of Penelope work together to conceal her clever gambit until the last moment.

Yet while the scene of the marriage bed serves to bring about the achievement of Penelope’s goal, I argue that the scene also acts within the text according to the third principle of disguise, *diverting* audience attention away from Homer’s final punctuation on Penelope’s hidden transcript of resistance. For domestic order to be restored (and for the poem to reach a conclusion), Penelope must accept Odysseus as her husband and master of the house, acceding her position of power. If she does not do this, his identity as master of the house and ruler of Ithaca is in doubt, and the poem has no conclusion. Penelope is the only one in the epic who can re-establish domestic order: ultimately, the *telos* (fulfillment) of the poem, and the fate of Ithaca, rests in a woman’s hands—an unpalatable prospect for much of Homer’s contemporary audience.

Subversive Discourse in Edgeworth’s Castle Rackrent

In *Castle Rackrent*,³⁹ Maria Edgeworth disguises two subversive discourses: that of members of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy who are sympathetic to the plight of the colonized native-Irish population and who, as avatars of modernity,⁴⁰ aim to reveal to the world the value of the Irish mind; and that of an Anglo-Irish observer who harbors conflicting opinions about

³⁹ *Castle Rackrent* is the earliest and best known of Maria Edgeworth’s “Irish novels.” Edgeworth was the first author to write English-language novels set in Ireland, populated with Irish characters, and addressing Irish themes. These are known as her Irish novels. *Castle Rackrent* was published in 1800, two years after the Rebellion of 1798 and a few months prior to Ireland’s union with Great Britain.

⁴⁰ Richard Lovell Edgeworth, for example, was a member of the Lunar Society of Birmingham, whose members applied practical science in the solution of industrial problems. While they and their inventions were often viewed indulgently as cranks by contemporaries, many of their ideas find expression in modern-day commonplaces (Butler 1972:34-35).

Ireland's impending Union with Great Britain but whose political voice is circumscribed by her sex and social position.

Edgeworth conceals both of these discourses beneath the veneer of another hidden transcript—that of the native Irish peasant—creating a clever double-layered disguise that masks her political opinions from an unsympathetic audience.⁴¹ To reveal Edgeworth's primary-level hidden transcripts, we must first unpack the secondary-level transcript of Edgeworth's fictional Irish Catholic narrator, Thady Quirk. Thady narrates the ignominious fall of the Protestant land-owning family he serves, and the takeover of the estate by his own son, Jason Quirk. Throughout the tale he professes his loyalty to the Rackrents and denounces the actions of his son, but a critical reading reveals more than one subversive message.

The earliest and best known of Maria Edgeworth's Irish novels, *Castle Rackrent* was published in 1800, two years after the Irish Rebellion and a few months before Ireland's Union with Britain.⁴² Unveiling subversive discourse in the novel presents a different interpretational challenge, due in part to the fact that the author is not nominally of the oral culture she depicts, which adds an additional layer of interpretive ambiguity. Where the rabbi-authors of the Talmud were participants in the oral culture the Talmud recalls, and where Homer was a participant in the oral culture that is the immediate environment of the *Odyssey's* composition and performance, the English-born, Protestant Maria Edgeworth is ostensibly an observer of the native-Irish, oral-traditional environment that Thady Quirk represents.

Yet Edgeworth cannot be called an "objective" observer: as a member of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, her social and political status is dependent on the Anglo-Irish role as political liaison *cum* social interpreter of what sixteenth-century writer John Derrick characterized as the natives' "wild shamrock manners" (Quinn 1966:62). If the Irish become wholly assimilated into the British Empire, and imperial England no longer has need for cultural interpreters, then arguably the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy loses its political *raison d'être* and has trouble justifying its "ascendancy" in imperial Ireland.⁴³

With the introduction of the anti-Catholic Penal Laws in 1695, it became increasingly difficult for Catholics to participate in social, economic, and political life in Ireland.⁴⁴ By 1714 only seven percent of the land in Ireland remained in the hands of Catholic landowners.

⁴¹ The extent to which Thady's voice is representative of Edgeworth's own views has been the source of much lively scholarly debate. See, for example, Butler (1972 and 1992); Cochran (2001); Corbett (1994); Egenolf (2005); Harden (1987); Hollingworth (1997); and Newcomer (1987).

⁴² The Irish Rebellion of 1798 was an uprising led by an Irish revolutionary group against British rule. The United Irishmen were inspired by both the American and French revolutions of the same time period. The rebellion was unsuccessful, and the Act of Union that followed in 1800 resulted in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.

⁴³ See Daniel Hack's (1996:147) discussion of the social and political position in which the Anglo-Irish find themselves in the period leading up to Union: "This group's identity is not so much national as what might be called inter-national, constituted as it is by the negotiation—not the union but the *trait d'union*—between two nations, two national identities." See also Kaufman and Fauske (2004:12).

⁴⁴ Catholics were excluded from the professions and from Parliament, and had restricted access to education. Schooling for the lower classes (when it existed), was often provided through the Protestant Church, and was thus not open to Catholics, or not palatable to them.

Prejudicial inheritance laws restricted Catholic landowning even further. The perceived need to “control Ireland” quickly became synonymous with the need to “control the Irish”—both to ensure that English settlers in Ireland did not become completely assimilated into the native culture and to ensure that the seemingly unpredictable and wily Irish were made to contribute positively to the new economic and social order. In a letter to a friend, Maria describes the genesis of the character of Thady Quirk as an exercise in literary mimicry: “He was an old steward (not very old, though, at that time; I added to his age, to allow him time for generations of the family[)]—I heard him when first I came to Ireland, and his dialect struck me, and his character, and I became so acquainted with it, that I could think and speak in it without effort: so that when, for mere amusement, without any ideas of publishing, I began to write a family history as Thady would tell it, he seemed to stand beside me and dictate and I wrote as fast as my pen could go.”⁴⁵

The Irish were viewed by the English public as savage, first and foremost because they were Catholic—and a rather “lax and archaic” type of Catholic at that (Foster 1988:30). They were also superstitious: their traditional folklore was populated with fairies and demons, and their rituals were suggestive of otherworldly forces unwelcome in the English Christian tradition. Finally, the Irish did not cultivate their land. Though parts of Ireland were considered by the English to be beautiful, the extensive and dangerous peat bogs were unappealing to English settlers. Much of the countryside must have seemed to the English to be symbolic of the perceived Irish character: inhospitable, deceptive, and wild.

Irish women were less conservative than English women, in both dress and bearing: they drank alcohol, wore what the English considered to be provocative clothing, could choose to keep their own names after marriage, and could demand (and receive) a divorce. The complex Irish laws of the *tuath* allowed a family to increase its familial circle by entering into deliberate commitments (that is, other than marriage) with other families. It was possible, for example, for a foster brother to be more deeply committed to his foster sibling than to his natural sibling (Foster 1988:26). The Irish legal system and the Irish land title system were so complex that they seemed to the English to be a “celebration of anarchy” designed to confuse the outsider (Foster 1988:26).

Even the Irish mode of speech was suspect: the use of exaggerated oral narrative and a fondness for metaphor, hyperbole, irony, and analogy fueled the English perception of the Irish as deceitful and, ultimately, rebellious. Patricia Palmer (2001:86-87) points to the Englishman’s lack of curiosity about the Irish language as a marker of the gulf between the oral-traditional native Irish culture and the highly literate world of the English settler.

By the late eighteenth century, though many of the restrictions imposed by the Penal Laws had been lifted, the cultural stereotype of the untrustworthy native-Irish rebel persisted (Foster 1988:206).⁴⁶ Tensions mounted through the 1790s in the wake of the French Revolution,

⁴⁵ Maria Edgeworth to Mrs. Stark, 6 September 1834, in Butler 1972:241. See particularly Foster (1988:32), although unflattering perceptions of Ireland go back much farther than this: see Strabo (63/64 BCE- c. 24 CE, in *Geography* 4:5.4); Pomponius Mela (d. c. 45 CE), *Description of the World* 3:53; Gerald of Wales (c. 1146-1223), *History and Topography of Ireland* (in Anderson and Bellenger 2003:291).

⁴⁶ See, for example, Foster 1988:206. There is also disagreement as to how strictly and universally some of the laws were enforced in the first place: see Foster 1988:205-207; Dowling 1968:22.

which the English feared would further fuel Irish unrest. When the Irish Rebellion erupted in 1798 with some of the bloodiest violence Europe had ever seen, Britain's worst fears about the Irish "savages" seemed justified; Susan Egenolf (2005:845) writes that "[a]s many as 30,000 people were killed in the Irish rebellion—more than in the French Reign of Terror." Edgeworth's Thady Quirk must have seemed rather harmless by comparison—a doting, foolish, and affable family retainer—a native Irishman who posed no threat and was easy to control.

Edgeworth's writing was profoundly affected by the social and political turmoil of the last decades of the eighteenth century. And, as Egenolf goes so far to argue (2005:851), any reading of *Castle Rackrent* "is incomplete without considering these surrounding events." It is less clear, however, precisely how these events shaped the character of Thady Quirk or the meaning of the text. What we know of Edgeworth's life complicates our interpretation as much as it clarifies. Edgeworth biographer Marilyn Butler (1972:271-398) suggests that Maria was driven by the desire to please—particularly to please not only her father, but also her reading public.

Arguably Edgeworth's desire to please sets the stage for the incorporation of hidden meaning beneath a patina of socially and politically acceptable dialogue. Edgeworth identified herself as Irish. She was both delighted and proud of the native Irishman's figurative use of the English language and fascinated by Irish irony and self-deprecatory expression.⁴⁷ What the reader hears in Thady's voice is a believable representation of a peasant Irishman's perspective, complete with irony, double entendres, and wit. But it is also possible that the author does exactly what her fictional narrator does: tells one story to please one audience, while injecting a subtext that better reveals her own perspective.

It is possible to read *Castle Rackrent* as a straightforward account of the sad collapse of a moneyed family—both a witty social commentary and a window onto a vulgar, "rustic world," believable precisely because of the simplicity and guilelessness of its narrator (Butler 1992:7-8). But while most early critics found in narrator Thady Quirk a simple, loyal soul, recent interpretation "has begun to swing the other way" (Butler 1992:8). Characterized by contradiction, the novel encourages a more nuanced reading (Neill 2001:89):

Thady, after all, as his mantle reminds us, is a man under cover, and like any undercover agent his success must depend in part on his ability to interiorize the very values he works so hard to undo . . . it is perfectly possible for feelings of genuine affection and respect to coexist with much more hostile and subversive attitudes; . . . their simultaneous fraudulence is often not apparent (because not consciously articulated) even to himself.

Thady's narrative follows a distinctive pattern: he salts his tale liberally with professions of loyalty to his retainers, and then gives us such a detailed and sordid account of the Rackrent family that we doubt such a sorry group could ever inspire anyone's good feeling. He professes his own ignorance, and then relates details that belie the extent of his knowledge and insight into

⁴⁷ Edgeworth's pride in her Irish countrymen's clever use of language is apparent in *Irish Bulls* (co-written with her father), an extended essay on the verbal blunders supposedly characteristic of the Irish when they speak English, where she writes that these "blunders" actually demonstrate "the eloquence, wit and talents of the lower classes of people in Ireland" (in Butler 1972:363).

human character. He extols the virtues of a man, and then tells us a tale that demonstrates the man's opposite qualities.

While Thady repeatedly professes his lack of sophistication and his general ignorance of gentlemanly subjects—the law, politics, business, and social custom—it is ultimately through such professions of “ignorance” that the reader learns quite a bit about Irish law, politics, business, and social custom. Arguably Thady's actions smooth the way for his attorney son Jason's eventual takeover of the Rackrent estate. By the end of the narrative, we question whether the illiterate and supposedly simple Thady Quirk is not, rather, a dubious and complex character indeed.

The novel includes an editorial frame: a Preface by a fictional Editor, as well as a Glossary and a Notes section, both styled as if written by the Editor. We are told by the Editor that Thady has been “persuaded” to recount the Rackrent family history, the retainer's “feelings for *‘the honour of the family’*, as he expressed himself, [having] prevailed over his habitual laziness” (1992 [1800]:63). The Editor assures us that we can believe the honesty of Thady's “plain, unvarnished tale” precisely because it lacks the refinement of the “highly ornamented narrative” penned by the consummate literary biographer: “[w]here we see that a man has the power, we may naturally suspect that he has the will to deceive us” (62). The implication is that Thady, the “illiterate old steward” (62), clearly does not have “the power” and therefore (we are to assume as a logical course) it is most unlikely that he has “the will” to deceive us. As readers we are encouraged to trust the Editor's assessment of Thady's simplicity and to accept his narrative with a similarly indulgent air.

Several factors support a more suspicious reading, however. First, if we take the Editor's observations of Thady's character at face value, then Thady is a simpleton, loyal to a family that clearly does not deserve his loyalty. Yet there is ample evidence to suggest that Thady is actually a shrewd observer of human character, with a keen wit and a fine-tuned ability to cloak his merciless display of the Rackrents' shortcomings beneath the seemingly disjointed ramblings of a simple-minded old fool. But if we dismiss the Editor's observations of Thady's character as simply incorrect, then other elements of the Editor's preliminary caution also become problematic. Either the professedly authoritative Editor is gullible and obtuse, taken in by an “illiterate old steward,” or the Editor is not taken in at all, leaving us to wonder if he is even complicit in Thady's deception. Thady's “plain, unvarnished tale,” which would have been believable were Thady an idiot precisely because of its lack of refinement, suddenly takes on all the sinister possibilities of the “highly ornamented narrative,” with its capacity to deceive. Now, every word that Thady “dictates” to the Editor becomes suspect: the Editor is no longer a reliable guide to native Irish culture; rather, if he is not Thady's accomplice, then he (and all he represents) is the target of Thady's duplicity.

Yet if we understand that the Editor is *not* taken in by Thady's presentation, then the role of the Editor itself becomes part of the novel's deception—for it is in part the Editor's pronouncements about Thady's character (and his firm editorial direction in the Preface, the Notes, and the Glossary) that sustain the credibility of Thady's narrative. If the Editor knows that Thady is not what he seems, then the Editor is no longer an honest guide; rather, he aids Thady's

subterfuge by declaring such subterfuge to be impossible.⁴⁸ Now we can no longer trust that these are indeed “tales from other times” or that “the manners depicted in the following pages are not those of the present age” (1992 [1800]:63). We cannot even trust the Editor’s characterization of Thady Quirk as illiterate, with all the implications of inferiority that the trope of the Irish illiterate suggests to literate, colonial England. Even Thady’s “partiality to *the family*, in which he was bred and born” (62) must be re-examined: Which “family” is meant? Is Thady loyal to the Rackrents? Or is he loyal to the Quirks, presumably the family in which he was “bred and born,” and which family, it could be argued, Thady’s actions best serve to benefit?⁴⁹

Thady’s critics fall into two camps. There are those, like Elizabeth Harden, who view Thady’s self-presentation as genuine (1987:91):

For Thady’s great appeal lies in his simple charm and unconscious naiveté, made possible by the artistic device of “transparency”—the ironic presentation of external fact in such a manner that the reader may see the truth underneath the external statement and draw his own conclusions.

James Newcomer (1967:151), on the other hand, sees Thady as “artful rather than artless, unsentimental rather than sentimental, shrewd rather than obtuse, clear-headed rather than confused, calculating rather than trusting.” This Thady takes advantage of circumstances and manipulates events to aid in his son’s acquisition of the Rackrent estate, all while professing innocence, ignorance, and loyalty to the family he betrays. While we must now be suspicious of everything Thady tells us, as Newcomer points out, “now we have to feel a degree of admiration for him” (*ibid.*).

Newcomer does not deny the possibility that Thady holds real affection for his Rackrent employers; he simply points out that, whatever Thady’s true feelings for the family, “at every step toward Jason’s acquisition of the whole estate, his father Thady aids and abets” (162). Thady, Newcomer argues, is not a simple soul (151): “The true Thady reflects intellect and power in the afflicted Irish peasant, who in generations to come will revolt and revolt again.”

I agree with Newcomer that a calculating Thady Quirk is suggested by internal clues in the novel itself, as well as by Edgeworth’s own family history.⁵⁰ Maria Edgeworth and her father both demonstrated an interest in coded messages and the ease with which text and other communication methods could be used to conceal information from one audience while it was being passed on to another. In 1795, Richard Lovell Edgeworth offered the Dublin government the use of his “tellograph,” an invention that enabled him to convey a coded message

⁴⁸ After all, we have been fairly warned of the likelihood of “literary manufacture” in the “highly ornamented narrative” by a man with the power and the will to deceive. Glover (2002:297-98) also highlights the possible duplicity of the editor.

⁴⁹ See Glover (2002:298), who points to the same ambiguity.

⁵⁰ For alternate interpretations, see Brookes (1977), Hollingworth (1997), and Warner (1981).

successfully from Scotland to Ireland;⁵¹ Maria wrote the paper that he delivered on June 27 1795, to the Royal Irish Academy, “An Essay on the Art of Conveying Secret and Swift Intelligence.”

In *Castle Rackrent*, as in Homer’s *Odyssey*, subversive discourse is concealed by the narration of two different tales simultaneously. The first tale is the innocent account introduced by the Editor—a tale of past unsavory Irish landlordism, a “tale of other times” told by a reluctant, naturally lazy and bashful illiterate. The second tale is a subversive and revolutionary one, in which the supposedly subservient native Irishman actually wields considerable control over his circumstances.

The first tale is the “factual” narrative, wherein we presume that Thady means exactly what he says. The Editor assures us that this narrative is trustworthy because it is told to us by a narrator who lacks guile, and whose tale demonstrates the dogged, misplaced loyalties of a devoted butler to the sort of family “which could no more be met with at present in Ireland” (Edgeworth 1998 [1800]:63). The second tale, however, is a distinctly native-Irish one, in which all things are not as they seem, in which irony abounds, and in which the very shrewd Thady lets the reader know exactly what he thinks of the Rackrent family—*provided the reader is “literate” in the narrative language that Thady is using*. In this second tale, a “world turned upside-down” version of Irish history, the illiterate and ignorant subordinate dominates his oppressor by virtue of, ironically, his cultural literacy: that is, Thady is fluent in two social “languages,” while the Editor is not.⁵² The first tale offers the Editor and the English audience an example of the sad, accepted narrative of Irish history, while the second tale speaks particularly to those members of Thady’s audience who understand the oral-narrative style that Thady uses. Part of the reason the disguise works so well is that arguably both narratives are true. Thady *is* the subservient, loyal retainer to the Rackrent family, but he *is also* a shrewd and manipulative orchestrator of the Rackrents’ downfall. He is at once proud of his son’s achievements and ashamed of his methods—perhaps because in both cases he recognizes in Jason a reflection of himself.

How can Thady be both subordinate *and* dominant? Subaltern studies scholar Homi K. Bhabha has observed that a desire to subvert the agenda of one’s oppressor cannot be equated with one’s desire to cease being subordinate.⁵³ A slave must at some level retain his perspective as a slave in order to fully appreciate the success of his subversive tactics, or, as O’Hanlon (1988:205-6) suggests, the slave must “stand in two places” in order to satisfy that part of himself that needs to witness the inversion of social power. Following this line of argument, Thady must retain his subaltern perspective in order to appreciate the reversal that occurs by the

⁵¹ The project had been undertaken previously by various seventeenth-century European thinkers, including John Wilkins, Fontenelle, and Leibnitz. Edgeworth’s invention was never used by Dublin—perhaps because Edgeworth’s loyalties were at times suspect both in County Longford and in the capital, see Butler (2001:275).

⁵² Or, at least, the editorial commentary suggests this to be the case. Arguably, one who recognizes the power of writing and text to effect particular communication (whether he is literate or not) is potentially better able to appreciate and control the processes of information-sharing than a literate individual who underestimates the value of non-literate expression.

⁵³ “It is difficult to conceive of the process of subjectification as a placing *within* Orientalist or colonial discourse for the dominated subject without the dominant being strategically placed within it too” (Bhabha 1983:24-25, emphasis in original).

end of the novel; that is, the reversal would not be complete *unless* his role as Rackrent family retainer, in itself “a kind of slavery” (Cochran 2001:61) had been fully experienced. Thus, he *is* “honest Thady” the loyal manservant, but he *is also* the duplicitous and untrustworthy native Irishman traditionally feared by the English. Determining where the “honest Thady” leaves off and where the duplicitous Thady begins is impossible, as the two aspects of his personality are inextricably intertwined.

We find evidence of the principle of *articulation* in the use throughout Thady’s narrative of the Irish bull and other verbally styled “irishisms.” These enable Thady to hide particular meanings behind words that (denotatively) mean something else. In many instances, truth is disguised by its exact opposite, or by a statement of extraordinary contradiction. Thus, at a very basic level, the elements that we generally understand to convey meaning in any text—namely, the written words themselves—are used in *Castle Rackrent* to *conceal* an oral “subtext.”

The principle of *construction*, the cloaking of subversive meaning in textual structure, is evident in Edgeworth’s use of the editorial apparatus. In most texts, the additions of a Preface, Glossary, Notes—the very use of an Editor—suggest an authority, an insight and an objectivity above and beyond what the core text can offer the audience.⁵⁴ In *Castle Rackrent*, however, the employment of the textually derived editorial apparatus conveys the very opposite of what it might mean in a wholly textual setting.

Finally, as in tractate Avodah Zarah and Homer’s *Odyssey*, the third principle of disguise is manifested in the extraneous details that draw audience attention away from the subversive message beneath the surface text. In *Castle Rackrent*, audience attention is diverted away from subversive meaning by the principle of *using words to disguise meaning*. In other words, Edgeworth uses Thady’s diction and syntax (and the Editor’s emphasis on Thady’s diction and syntax) to focus audience attention on what Thady *says* and divert audience attention away from what Thady *does*. This enables the narrator to take advantage of the Rackrent family’s misfortunes and misdeeds in order to help his son take over the Rackrent estate, all while proclaiming his innocence and ignorance of the finer points of law and politics. Because Thady’s diction and syntax mark him as an unsophisticated, uneducated native, and because the image of the uncivilized savage is such an ingrained one in the English imperial consciousness, it is possible—even easy—for the “civilized” English reader (Edgeworth’s primary contemporary audience) to overlook any of Thady’s actions that do not adequately reflect the popular image of the uncivilized imperial subject.

A closer examination of the text illustrates how each element of the disguise works in conjunction with the others. First, we will consider how the words themselves disguise subversive discourse.

⁵⁴ This formal editorial “carapace” (Hollingworth 1997:100) was encouraged by Richard Edgeworth and added later, hurriedly, in the autumn prior to publication. Because of this, “there is a temptation to look on [the editorial material] as afterthoughts, irrelevant to the narrative” (Hollingworth 1997:99). Yet Hollingworth argues that the haste with which these parts were added “may actually be a sign of their importance. If the rush to publication occurred in the context of the urgency of the Union debate, it can be argued that the formal additions were seen as indispensable features of the text” (1997:100). He continues: “The Notes and Glossary . . . act to promote *Castle Rackrent* from the position of fictional narrative to that of sociological document . . . By such treatment the narrative text is legitimized. The comic triviality of the provincial tale is reconstituted as a document of scientific interest” (102).

In the Preface, Edgeworth invites the reader to forgive Thady's simple-mindedness (1992 [1800]:62):

[w]here we see that a man has the power, we may naturally suspect that he has the will to deceive us; and those who are used to literary manufacture know how much is often sanctified to the rounding of a period, or the pointing of an antithesis.

But it is also possible to read Edgeworth's words as a warning: despite his illiteracy, Thady has "the power" to deceive; the manipulation of words in order to disguise meaning is not the exclusive domain of the literate.

Thady's rhetorical style arguably conceals from the fictional Editor the Irishman's true opinions of the Rackrent family and the underlying motivations for his actions. He uses a distinctly Irish oral style, known for its colorful hyperbole, fantastic claims, and flamboyant analogies,⁵⁵ all of which serve to conceal his unflattering judgment of the Rackrent family. While it is possible to read Thady's memoir as the nostalgic reflection of a simple, uneducated peasant, it is also possible to read it as the narrative of one who uses the *guise* of a simple, uneducated peasant to relate a tale with a very different message.

We know, for example, that Thady is a man who prefers not to do unnecessary work. First, he begins his narrative on "Monday morning." The Glossary informs us that all new projects are begun by the native Irish on Monday morning: "all the intermediate days, between the making of [excuses] and the ensuing Monday, are wasted: and when Monday morning comes, it is ten to one that the business is deferred to *the next* Monday morning" (1992 [1800]: 123, emphasis in original). Second, Thady "walks slow and hates a bustle" (72), and his pipe and his solitude are cherished companions: "I had no one to talk to and if it had not been for my pipe and tobacco, should, I verily believe, have broke my heart for poor Sir Murtagh" (72). The "ignorant English reader" may understand this shirking of duties to be examples of Thady's laziness. Yet if we suspect that Thady is being subversive rather than loyal (or subversive *despite* his loyalty), then his words instead signal his contempt for the Rackrent family, as well as his practical good sense. Why begin a new project at the end of the week when one's time could be spent more enjoyably with pipe and tobacco? More to the point, why "bustle" to begin a new project for a family for whom you have little respect and who, doubtless, will put you to work sooner or later anyway?⁵⁶

Throughout this ambiguous presentation of Thady's character, we are constantly reminded (both by the Glossary and by Thady's frequent references to his own illiteracy and lack of education) that Thady is not writing the narrative *himself*. He is having someone else write the story *for* him. And while he could have chosen to dictate the story to "my son Jason," who is both literate and educated, he has chosen to dictate his tale to someone who A) is not a member

⁵⁵ See Foster (1988:26). For a discussion of Irish oral style in *Castle Rackrent*, see Neill (2001).

⁵⁶ On beginning a new project at the end of the week, Chuilleanáin (1996:28) adds: "The Editor's impatience is that of an employer irritated by the resistance of the Irish worker; the reader is assumed to belong to the same class and thus to share his exasperation. But the employer's power over his laborers is simultaneously called into question by the absurdity of beginning work on the *last* day of the week and the tyranny of the authority that demands it."

of the lower classes, and B) is most capable of telling the tale to the greatest number of non-native-Irish and non-lower-class individuals. The Editor's own marginalia underscore the fact that Thady's disguise has been so successful that the Editor is not even aware of the essentially subservient role he himself plays in Thady's subterfuge.

Thady openly professes loyalty to and admiration for his employers at various points in the text. This is in keeping with expectations common in imperial England, that the unsophisticated lower-class subjects of the imperial order are grateful to those wealthier and powerful civilizing forces that undertake to "improve" them, and that a peasant's naïveté can lead to misplaced admiration and loyalty. Thady also peppers his narrative with references to native-Irish fairies and folklore. This supports imperial England's stereotype of the native Irish peasant as uneducated and superstitious. Yet a suspicious reading of Thady's professions of loyalty, his use of Irish rhetorical style, and his references to Irish folklore suggests that such statements serve merely to disguise his real opinions, which are not admiring but, rather, mocking and disdainful. Though he refers to Sir Murtagh as a "learned man in the law," he then describes how many suits the man has lost and the extent of his debt due to his obsession with legal wrangling. And though Murtagh is "a learned man in the law, he was a little too incredulous in other matters" and dies soon after he has the bad judgment to dig up a fairy-mount. To one audience, Thady's declaration of Murtagh's expertise, followed by a nonchalant discussion of Murtagh's incompetence, attests to the unsophisticated peasant's misplaced loyalty to a wealthy employer in a position of power. To an audience familiar with Thady's oral-traditional narrative style, however, Thady's particular dismissal of Sir Murtagh's "learning" implies that Thady considers there to be wisdom in peasant superstition and a certain poetic justice in Sir Murtagh's ignominious end.

Next, we will consider how structure hides subversive discourse. The editorial apparatus in *Castle Rackrent* functions rhetorically as a literary disguise of an oral hidden transcript. The Notes and the Glossary create a structural framework that serves to mask any subversive ideas that Thady (or Edgeworth) might express. For Edgeworth's audience, the editorial devices and the fictional Editor confer upon each other and, circularly, the editorial material the air of expertise and authority. At the same time, their use implies that the subject of the editorial commentary (both the human subject and the narrative subject) is less authoritative and less sophisticated than the Editor himself. Thus, the structure of the book itself immediately suggests that Thady's narrative is uncultured and suspect—suspect not because it conceals something subversive but, rather, because it is too simple for the sophisticated reader to understand without adequate editorial guidance by an expert accustomed to dealing with uncivilized cultural subjects.⁵⁷

It is very difficult, however, to view the Editor as authoritative once we have revealed the use of disguise through diction and syntax. If we know that the words of Thady's text conceal subversive meaning, and we have been fairly warned that "[w]here we see that a man has the power, we may naturally suspect that he has the will to deceive us" (62), then we can no longer trust the guidance of the Editor, whom Edgeworth deliberately styles as "[having] the power"

⁵⁷ See John Cronin, who notes that the linguistic "otherness" of the native Irish population created anxiety among Anglo-Irish leaders, and that this anxiety is reflected in Anglo-Irish novels of the time, which "nearly always [come] to us with [their] footnotes or afternotes packed with details of regional explication" (1980:11).

and as being “used to literary manufacture” (62). Ironically, it seems, the literary Editor does not have as much power or as much skill in literary manufacture as the illiterate native Irishman whose idiom the Editor attempts to “translate” for the “*ignorant* English reader” (63, emphasis in original). The Editor’s overconfidence serves to underscore the fact that he himself is not aware of much of the oral subtext of Thady’s narrative. While he explains peculiar or intriguing Irish idiom and custom where it is clearly introduced in the text, he fails to consider the possibility that the entire narrative is an extended Irish bull, overlooks those parts of the text in which Thady uses irishisms less obviously, and is oblivious to much of the wit in Thady’s words. Ultimately, the “authority” conferred on the fictional Editor by Edgeworth’s editorial carapace serves to disguise the fact that, where Irish oral tradition is concerned, Thady is actually the authority, and the Editor is the illiterate.

Last, we will consider how diversionary tactics—red herrings—are used to disguise subversive discourse. Though he is pigeon-holed by the fictional Editor as a simpleton, Thady Quirk is actually a character of contradiction, conflicted in his feelings for the Rackrent family and torn in his loyalties to the family he has served and the family he has sired. He professes distress at the poor treatment of Sir Condy by his son Jason⁵⁸ but still encourages the latter’s ambitions. While his affection for the Rackrents seems genuine, it does not stop him from airing the family’s dirtiest linens. Yet traditionally Thady has been judged by what he *says* as a loyal family retainer rather than by what he *does*, even though the latter ultimately serves to aid in the fall of the Rackrent family and the takeover of the estate by Jason Quirk. Thady’s language draws our attention away from the discrepancies between his words and his actions. Not only do Thady’s words themselves hide subversive meaning, however; the fact that Thady *uses a particular vernacular* also conceals subversion. Arguably, we see evidence of the third principle of disguise—the red herring, or the diversion that draws audience attention elsewhere—in the fact that Thady speaks the way that he does.

The text invites another interpretation, however. It is possible that Thady Quirk’s entire narrative—his use of the vernacular, the relationship between Thady and the Editor, the use of the editorial structure, and the potential for Thady’s account to disguise a subversive message of social resistance—is *in itself* the red herring, employed by Edgeworth, wittingly or unwittingly, as the looming political Union with Britain rendered the role of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy increasingly ambiguous. If Edgeworth wished to conceal a political critique, this double blind—a hidden transcript disguised by another hidden transcript—would have enabled her to do so, cloaking any personal, subversive opinions with Thady’s narrative (which potentially disguises the Irishman’s resistance beneath the patina of a feigned naïveté). By creating a narrator who can be interpreted on many levels, Edgeworth encourages her audience to focus on the ambiguities inherent in the tale being told—that is, *Thady’s* tale. With audience attention focused on Thady’s narrative, Edgeworth would have been able to express social and political opinions that could not otherwise be expressed openly by a professed supporter of the imperial order (as the Edgeworth family was), let alone by a woman with no official political voice. The most compelling hidden transcript in *Castle Rackrent* is a distinctly female, Anglo-Irish one—one that arguably would have had much to say about the impending Union with Great Britain.

⁵⁸ See Edgeworth (1992 [1800]:109).

Discussion and Conclusion

The three texts considered here employ similar processes to cloak subversive ideology beneath a veil of oral-traditional referents⁵⁹ unique to the environment in which each text was created or used. Within the framework of the analytical model introduced in this paper, the Talmud can be read as a “blueprint” for resistance, one that enabled Babylonian Jews to preserve and transmit a particular political and social philosophy. By deliberately preserving dissent, the rabbis endorsed a form of intellectual debate that encouraged questioning authority—not only of other rabbinic scholars, but of God Himself.⁶⁰ The fact that in many cases resolution is not wholly achieved, or is achieved only after long debate, suggests that the ultimate goal was not resolution, but discussion, reflection and, ultimately, deeper insight.

Homer’s *Odyssey* can be read as a tale of female resistance to male domination: Penelope rewrites to some extent the role circumscribed for her within an ancient Greek patriarchy. Homer conceals this narrative by writing two versions of Penelope: the virtuous, socially acceptable Penelope conceals not only a subversive Penelope but also Homer’s provocative social commentary on male/female relationships in ancient Greece. While both versions of Penelope are duplicitous, the virtuous Penelope is simplistically, almost childishly so, and her deceit can be forgiven in the context of an ancient culture that expects women to be intellectually and morally weak. Behind this Penelope lurks a much more dangerously deceptive Penelope—one whose duplicity empowers only Penelope herself. Homer uses a transcript of tacitly acceptable resistance (that is, Penelope deceives the suitors in order to further her husband’s social and political goals) to conceal a socially unacceptable transcript of resistance (that is, Penelope deceives Odysseus in order to further her own social and political goals). The fate of Ithaca is in the hands of this second Penelope: Odysseus may be king, but Penelope has the power to deny him his throne.

Much like Homer, *Castle Rackrent*’s narrator Thady Quirk tells us two tales at once. The first tale satisfies the expectations of the dominant audience, represented by the “ignorant English reader” and the Anglo-Irish landowning class. The second tale speaks to the subordinate population represented by the native-Irish peasantry. Thady’s fluency in two cultural languages—the oral traditions of his native-Irish upbringing and the idiom of a dominant Protestant Anglo-Ireland—enables him to disguise his role in the downfall of the Rackrent family beneath his loyal servitude. The disguise is successful precisely because both aspects of Thady are truthful representations of the “real” Thady Quirk, a study of eminently human contrasts. He *is* a loyal servant but he *is also* a clever traitor. He loves the family he serves, despite its flaws, but he also loves the family into which he was born, and the goals and desires of the two are difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile.

Yet Thady’s entire narrative, and the editorial carapace that encases it, serve ultimately to divert audience attention away from another hidden transcript, namely, Edgeworth’s warning that the role of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy as political and cultural liaison is secure only as long as the English and the native Irish continue to mystify each other. A political union with Great

⁵⁹ See Foley’s discussion of “referential language” (1999).

⁶⁰ For more on the political program of the Talmud, see Biale (1986).

Britain threatens to upset that balance. Ultimately, we are not meant to be able to read Thady Quirk's intentions; he exists *in order to confuse*—he is the author's symbolic representation of the cultural gap between the English and the native Irish, and the ongoing need for Anglo-Irish “translators.”⁶¹

A key similarity among the three texts considered here is that dialogue disguises action. Arguably, when a textual scene is stripped of all literary explanation for why or how a character does things, the meaning of the scene changes. If we strip away the dialogue (that is, an individual's diction or syntax, the exchange that occurs between characters within the confines of the narrative, or the language used by the narrator) and examine simply the function of a scene or the action that occurs within the text, it is apparent that the characters' actions differ in some cases quite significantly from what the text or characters *say* they do or intend to do. It is in the gap between the dialogue and the action that the narratives' socially subordinate characters are able to defy the dominant hegemony.

The three-principle model of disguise is not limited to its capacity to illustrate the context of defiance, however. Because it focuses on specific relationships between the text and the text's oral-traditional referents, the model provides a flexible framework for the comparative analysis of—potentially—any cultural phenomena that one individual or group may wish to conceal from another. Many aspects of human experience are not the primary subject-matter of historical documents—the role of women in a social patriarchy, for example, the social function of sexuality, and the perceptions of children. But a critical reading of a particular text may still reveal these human perspectives. For this reason, I have expressed the principles inherent in the disguise process in general terms, making them readily transferable to varying contexts. Though the precise expression of disguise may differ from text to text, the model potentially enables the observer to make cross-cultural comparisons not only about “hidden transcripts of resistance” but also about concealed discourse on other topics, providing a window onto how oral-traditional cultures might disguise ideas by interweaving text and oral tradition, wielding both in tandem to create a formidable “weapon of the weak.”

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⁶¹ On the possibility that Edgeworth is being consciously ironic, see Harden (1987); Warner (1981:47); Brookes (1977, espec. 600-1); and Neill (2001).

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