

Harlequin in Ireland: The Use of Pantomime in Somerville and Ross's Irish R. M. Stories

Julie Anne Stevens
Trinity College, Dublin

Abstract

Edith Somerville and Martin Ross's interest in 19th century pantomime determined the development of their series of comic Irish short stories, *Some Experiences of an Irish R.M.* (1899), *Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.* (1908), and *In Mr. Knox's Country* (1914). Their treatment of character and caricature in both text and illustration originates in popular stage representation. I will argue in this article that the main Irish character of the series, Florence McCarthy Knox, does not so much demonstrate stage Irish qualities as manifest the predominant mask of pantomime and carnival: the darkly comic Harlequin. Flurry Knox introduces what Baudelaire describes as "*la frontière du merveilleux*" (1976, 541), the delirium of the harlequinade. Leading the wild Irish hunt, he effects a kind of madness with his whirling whip and unreliable temper. Like an acrobat, he leaps stone walls and grassy banks, and like a chameleon, he mingles with the highest and lowest of the land. With this figure and the rest of the harlequinade who make up the core cast of the Irish R. M. stories, Somerville and Ross recall the inherently theatrical nature of Irish country life. Their stories thus include familiar Irish material, but their artful technique, accompanied by Somerville's numerous illustrations, transforms it into what Bakhtin describes as the "chronotope of the *entr'acte*, the chronotope of theatrical space" (1981, 163) in a series of pieces which can only be described as writing which 'stages' Ireland.

Ha! Not to be vouchsafed the boon of Death!
To be prohibited repose from Life!
To bear about this clay-frame, with its grave-hues,
Its maladies, its charnel-odours;
To be compelled to see, through uncounted years,
The yawning monster, Sameness,
And the insatiable monster, Time,
Still bearing children, still devouring children!
Ha! Not to be vouchsafed the boon of death!—
From Mangan's "The Wandering Jew" (1837)

This article addresses the question of whether or not the late nineteenth century Anglo-Irish writers, Edith Somerville and Martin Ross,

employed stage-Irish figures in their comic short fiction by considering the connection of their use of caricature to a European tradition. Critics like Maureen Waters in *The Comic Irishman* or, more recently, Joep Leerssen in *Remembrance and Imagination*, claim that Somerville and Ross's colonial background determines their superficial treatment of Irish character in the R. M. stories. Waters says that the Ascendancy writers' racism gave rise to their creation of characters who are "a comic exposition of Arnold's thesis as outlined in his *Study of Celtic Literature*". She sees Major Yeates as the manifestation of Saxon dullness opposing the "unpredictable countrymen" and rustic clowns of Celtic Ireland (1984, 15–16). Leerssen describes the main Irish figure of the R. M. (Resident Magistrate) stories, Florence or Flurry Knox, as a positive stage-Irish male type, what he describes as "the pleasant peasant" whose boyish traits counter English stereotyping of itself as adult male (1996, 171). I will argue against an exclusively cultural-political reading of the R. M. stories by considering the writers' inheritance of a tradition running alongside the developments in Irish literature and largely ignored by Somerville and Ross's critics. Popular theatre—burlesque and pantomime—as it intersects with the creation of the Irish national character of the 19th century brings about the kinds of figures we find in Somerville and Ross's short fiction. In other words, aesthetic demands, as much as political motive determine the creation of caricature in the Anglo-Irish fiction of the period.

Somerville and Ross issued the first batch of their comic short stories in the British sporting magazine, *Badminton*, at the end of the 19th century. They had already gained recognition with the publication of a series of novels set in Ireland and published in England. The finest of these, *The Real Charlotte* (1894), satirizes class-consciousness and land-grabbing in the Irish countryside. The three collections of R. M. stories which followed, *Some Experiences of an Irish R. M.* (1899), *Further Experiences of an Irish R. M.* (1908), and *In Mr. Knox's Country* (1915), however, were more appreciated for their humour and high spirits than the satirical political commentary underpinning such light-hearted fun. More recent criticism has begun to address the pointed humour and artful commentary of their most popular works.¹ Critics have begun to realize Somerville and Ross's significant contribution to the Irish short story,² a contribution overshadowed by the glare of gossip and self-proclaimed wonder of the group of people clustering around Coole Park and Lady Gregory's hospitable board.

Like Augusta Gregory, Martin Ross's cousin, the short story writers possessed an acute awareness of their inheritance of stage-Irish types. Lady Gregory addressed the issue in an article published the year Somerville and Ross came out with their first collection of R.M. stories. Gregory's "Ireland Real and Ideal" appeared in the English periodical, *The Nineteenth Century*, and defended the Irish peasant who for too long had worn the mask of "boastful adventurer" or "rollicking buffoon" conferred by stage and literary

tradition (1898, 769–82). Somerville and Ross also criticised stage-Irish buffoonery in articles such as “Children of the Captivity” (1906), and as illustrator as well as contributing writer of the R.M. stories, Edith Somerville stressed the originality of her character studies. Writing to her agent in 1906, for instance, she pointed out that her work presented “a class of drawing not easily come by as they are all from real Irish country people, & are typical of their class” (Somerville 1906).

Like Lady Gregory, Somerville and Ross sought to present a realistic rather than an idealistic view of the Irish countryside. Much of the humour of their stories relies upon the subversion of notions of a picturesque Ireland and a charming peasantry. What seems to be a fetching scene, whether it is the sublime backdrop of Lough Lonan in “Waters of Strife” or the charmingly picturesque appearance of Mrs. Honora Brickley in “The Boat’s Share”, turns out to be its opposite. Mrs. Brickley, the fishwife, may initially appear as some kind of “sacred picture”; the text reveals a different story:

Her rippling grey hair gleamed like silver in the sunlight, her face was straight-browed and pale, her grey eyes met mine with respectful self-possession. She might have been Deborah the prophetess, or the mother of the Gracchi; as a matter of fact I recognized her as a certain Mrs. Honora Brickley, mother of my present kitchenmaid, a lady whom, not six months before, I had fined in a matter of trespass and assault. (Somerville and Ross 1989a, 322–23)

Despite such ironic treatment of the peasantry, the R.M. stories present a range of figures who bear stereotyped Irish qualities and who appear to come close to that stage buffoonery which the writers despised. There is, first of all, the trickster and charming ne’er-do-well, Flurry Knox, who introduces the Resident Magistrate (symbol of British law and order) to the Irish countryside. Flurry, an Anglo-Irish squireen who knows horses and dogs better than he knows his own family, loves his second cousin, Sally Knox. The first collection of stories deals with the various obstacles Flurry must overcome in his pursuit of Sally. Second, we have an Irish clown, the tipsy storyteller, Slipper. Finally, there is a peasantry whose fighting, mischief making, and love of drink and song might be described as stereotypically Irish national characteristics. Common to all is the prevalence of an ‘extreme of temperament’, a picturesque vivacity considered to be a defining quality of the Irish national character throughout the century and as much an aspect of the sublime landscape as it is of the people: when they be good, they be very, very good, and when they be bad, they be horrid. In *Researches in the South of Ireland* of 1824, for instance, Thomas Crofton Croker discovers an over-riding characteristic in the Irish peasantry. The peasantry possess, and Croker quotes Giraldus Cambrensis to support his

point, "extremes of temperament": "'When they ... be bad, you shall no where meet with worse, if they be good, you can hardly find better'" (1969, 13). Flurry demonstrates such extremes of temperament in his chameleon-like nature; one moment he appears to be in the highest of spirits and the next he struggles with dark irritation and despair. Unlike placid and unchanging Major Yeates, Flurry tends to adapt his mood to suit his environment, and the extraordinary dimensions of his character match his ability to mix with the highest and lowest of the land. Flurry Knox mingles as easily with stable-boys as he does with gentlemen; like an acrobat, he turns somersaults across the Irish social terrain and like a magician, he manages to effect transformations within his domain of the Irish hunt.

As Master of the Hounds, Flurry Knox can alter a sedate country scene into chaos with a flick of his whip; Lady Knox turns fool and Slipper becomes king. The orderly way of the world reverses when Flurry leads his followers after the fox and carnival ensues. Thus, Flurry not only manifests extremes of temperament, he also introduces Major Yeates and his English wife, Philippa, to a different kind of world discoverable in the Irish countryside, a "life in the chronotope of the *entr'acte*, the chronotope of theatrical space", as Bakhtin describes festival time (1981, 163). Flurry belongs to this in-between time; he demonstrates the attributes of a stock theatrical figure—harlequin—and his stereotyped qualities issue as much from popular pantomime as they do from colonial stereotyping of the other.

Before considering the nature of harlequin and the use of his figure in the R. M. stories, I would like to deliberate further on the "extremes of temperament" (Croker 1969, 13) identified as the defining feature of the Irish character from Giralduus Cambrensis onwards. We might consider a connection between this aspect of Irishness and the more general discussion of caricature by looking at an example of such an extreme figure in Melmoth of Charles Maturin's 1820 novel, *Melmoth the Wanderer*. This Anglo-Irish Mephistopheles provided Charles Baudelaire with his main example to explain modern caricature in "De l'essence du rire" of 1855.³ For the Irish writer, Maturin, the extremities of Melmoth's nature recalled the Irish national character; for the French theorist, Baudelaire, Melmoth manifested the paradoxical nature of caricature.

At the beginning of the 19th century, Charles Maturin, like his contemporary Lady Morgan, noted that the extreme conditions of Irish life determined his method of "painting life" and that necessary exaggeration of depiction resulted from living in Ireland. In his introduction to *The Milesian Chief* (1812), for instance, Maturin claimed that his chiaroscuro techniques suited the sublime Irish landscape:

If I possess any talent, it is that of darkening the gloomy, and of deepening the sad; of painting life in the extremes, and representing

those struggles of passion when the soul *trembles on the verge* of the unlawful and unhallowed.

In the following pages I have tried to apply these powers to the scenes of actual life: and I have chosen my own country for the scene, because I believe it the only country on earth, where, from the strange existing opposition of religion, politics, and manners, the extremes of refinement and barbarism are united, and the most wild and incredible situations of romantic story are hourly passing before modern eyes. (1979, iv-v; my emphasis)⁴

Maturin most successfully depicts a character trembling on the edge of an abyss, forever posed between extreme conditions, with Melmoth. This extraordinary character, reminiscent of Goethe's Mephistopheles and anticipating James Clarence Mangan's Wandering Jew, is "prohibited repose from life" (Mangan 1996, 380). The Wandering Jew, as Mangan tells us, remains outside of the dictates of time:

Compelled to see, through uncounted years,
The yawning monster, Sameness,
And the insatiable monster, Time,
Still bearing children, still devouring children! (1996, 380)

In the same way, Melmoth, having sold his soul to the devil, leaves Ireland to range the world in search of some desperate man or woman who will take his place. Neither time nor space impedes his journey; he wanders across Europe, recognised by all men, and he wanders across time, never changing or growing old.

Maturin's characterization, then, results from the extreme conditions of Irish life which, he says, brings forth a 'trembling' or wavering position best demonstrated by Melmoth's ambivalence. For Baudelaire in "De l'essence du rire", this state indicates caricature: "le Sage ne rit qu'en tremblant" (1976, 526). The Sage only laughs while trembling because he understands the evil his humour courts. It is as though he stands on the edge of a cliff face, contemplating his inevitable fall and forever wavering in between. It is knowledge, like the demon's shuddering knowledge of God, which produces his wild laughter. Caricature is the result of knowledge. Caricature is a knowing art; self-conscious and self-reflective, it reveals a progression from innocent realism to experienced exaggeration. Its attributes—ambivalence, self-awareness—are those of romantic irony. Like caricature, romantic irony calls attention to the artifice involved and destroys dramatic illusion or innocence.⁵

Baudelaire's description of the 'essence of laughter' identifies the primary ingredient of caricature as an anxious or trembling knowledge of the ways of the world. The child or pure innocent—the whole person—cannot

laugh in this way. Only those like Melmoth, the "célèbre voyageur ... la grande création satanique" (Baudelaire 1976, 531), possess what Maturin describes in his novel as a "mask which hides the convulsed and distorted features of agony", a "laughter which never yet was the expression of rapture" and is "the only intelligible language of madness and misery" (1968, 352).

The best exemplar of the ambivalence of laughter and its source in pride is Melmoth, who laughs because of "his double contradictory nature, which is infinitely great relative to man, infinitely vile and base relative to truth and absolute Justice" (Baudelaire 1976, 531). Melmoth's anguished laughter does not spring from gaiety or joy. Its ambivalence represents a knowing apprehension of the world in its entirety, both innocence and experience; it masks underlying pain.

To analyze Somerville and Ross's use of caricature, we need to consider both the discourse on the Irish national character as well as modernist developments in caricature. Baudelaire's essay acts as a central connection point. The mid-century text bridges earlier and later 19th century works, Anglo-Irish and French traditions, visual and textual forms. For these reasons as well as Somerville and Ross's emphasis in their later works on both textual and visual caricature, Baudelaire's essay might be seen as relevant material.

Somerville and Ross's depiction of Flurry Knox as volatile and unpredictable may have as much to do with a tradition of romantic irony as it does with notions of Irishness. Melmoth's masking, his "double contradictory nature", his ambivalence, features of romantic irony as well as what Baudelaire describes as aspects of caricature, can be traced in the Irish characters of the darkly comic world of Somerville and Ross. With this in mind we might note that the Irish writers' sojourn in France coincided with a swift rise in newspaper publications and a revived popular interest in carnival. By the end of the century, six thousand papers in Paris enlivened political debate (Melot 1984, 155–56) so that Martin Ross writing home from the French capital could compare the caricatures of the English in a variety of publications.⁶

Edith Somerville first visited Paris in 1884 when she may have come across a recently launched periodical called *Chat Noir* (1883). Illustrations of a malevolent harlequin and an effete, white-garbed Pierrot may have caught her eye (Welsford 1935, 307–308). Her familiarity with such figures, and especially harlequin, would have increased when two years later she met her second cousin, Violet Martin (Martin Ross). Martin's older brother, Robert Martin, wrote pantomimes, and his young sister shared his keen interest in popular theatre. For example, in 1886, Robert Martin's *Bluebeard* appeared in the Dublin Gaiety and it included various novelties: a Turkish bazaar, ballet acrobatics, and, of course, the harlequinade.⁷

Martin Ross regularly attended the theatre in London and Dublin. As *The Selected Letters of Somerville and Ross* attests, it is she, and not Edith Somerville, who watched Yeats's and Lady Gregory's plays in the Abbey (Somerville and Ross 1989b, 253, 272, and 274). She liked the Fay brothers for their comic abilities, and she had a particular appreciation for dark comedy. As a young woman, she encouraged the friendship and confidence of her second cousin, William G. Wills, an Irish playwright in London; their friendship coincided with Wills's completion of his immensely popular adaptation of Goethe's *Faust*, which opened in 1885. So the same year Edith Somerville was working on her art in Colarossi's studio in Paris, Martin Ross discussed and possibly assisted in the forthcoming production of Willie Wills's "adult pantomime" in London (Bingham 1978, 215). (In his letters to Violet Martin, Willie Wills refers to her as his amanuensis and gives other indications that the young woman may have assisted in transcribing his work.)⁸ "Life's shady side", as she described it in "Memoir of Robert", and all its chiaroscuro effects fascinated Martin Ross and her interest in pantomime appears to have lain with the ambiguous nature of harlequin who adapted so well to the Mephisto figure. Let us look briefly at harlequin's origins to consider his significance to the discussion on caricature and the potential for his use in Ireland.

Harlequin is a hybrid figure whose background mixes malevolent forces and comic fun. He appeared first in popular legend as a devil "leading that ghostly nocturnal cortege known as the Wild Hunt" (Welsford 1935, 288). His original devilish aspect never quite faded when he later appeared in the guise of a comic acrobat dressed in motley with a black mask, carrying a bat and wearing a hat with a fox's tail in the *Commedia dell'Arte*. He was of uncertain nationality and possessed a chameleon-like nature (Welsford 1935, 290-91). In the seventeenth century in the *Comédie Italienne* in Paris, a mix of Italian and French material, harlequin emerged as the central figure of pantomime (294). In later French works of the eighteenth century, the servant Arlequin is transformed in Arcadia to the natural man, the one who can teach his master many lessons based on his closeness to nature. In England during this period, John Rich as Lun developed a form of pantomime which became its basic structure: the first part of the pantomime contained a serious theme from mythology or legend while the second part dealt with Harlequin and Columbine's love affair. Obstacles, such as attentions from the rival suitor, Pantaloon, obstruct the successful course of love. Harlequin must use his magic bat to effect transformations and enchantments to secure his Columbine (Mayer 1969, 4-5). The harlequinade involves the antics, the tricks and acrobatics, of the familiar figures who appear essentially unchanged in different pantomime.⁹

What is the difference between comedy and pantomime? According to David Mayer in his study of the English pantomime in the early 19th century, it is a difference of intent, which he illustrates with a comparison

especially relevant to Somerville and Ross: "A comedy is ... similar to a hunting expedition organized and equipped to bring down or capture a particular quarry; every time it is sent out, it hunts the same game". The pantomime, however, pursues multiple topics—"pantomime resembled a different kind of hunting expedition, one always organized in the same fashion but equipped to hunt any sort of game. The quarry was always mixed, often illogical, and frequently barely worth the shot that brought it down" (Mayer 1969, 5). The hunt always used the same characters: Harlequin (Flurry), Columbine (Sally Knox), Clown (Slipper), and Pantaloon (Bernard Shute). In pantomime after pantomime (just as in story after story of the R.M. series) these figures appear, and their familiar antics introduce unfamiliar game or quarry. The pantomime is a particularly useful means of bringing together a rattle bag of material.

Harlequin's ravenous presence in the early 19th century attests to his ability to adapt to all sorts of material; his versatility and mixed background make him both a stock comic character and a strangely fluid cypher who spans in his nature extreme differences. Like Melmoth in Maturin's novel, harlequin wanders Europe, a figure in every play, the agent of transformation on every stage. He enters the twentieth century unchanged and eminently adaptable. Picasso paints him in Barcelona in 1917 as the artist outcast. Indeed, Picasso's earlier cubist "Harlequin", what he considered to be his best treatment of the theme, demonstrates the extraordinary dimensions of this figure (Walther 1994, 691). In the 1915 "Harlequin", one arm is white and one arm is black; half the head is black and half white; while a toothy grin stretches across both, much as Melmoth's jocular laugh spans the gap between heaven and hell. In the case of the Irish character, living in Ireland causes this distortion. Harlequin, wherever he exists, appears as both devil and comic saviour. He wavers between extremes and his motley costume never admits allegiance to any dimension. He trembles forever in between.

Harlequin is a stage figure, and like the festival fool is part of carnival time. However, unlike the fool or the clown, he does not emerge entirely from the folk. Harlequin "is ... a creature of make-believe", he does not possess "religious significance or subversive tendencies" because he emerges from nowhere and has no allegiance to any domain (Welsford 1935, 299). Harlequin is a figure of stage, the product of theatre rather than the popular imagination. He is the stuff of pure artifice.

Flurry Knox is Harlequin. He dances, fools, and falls in love. He introduces what Baudelaire describes as "*la frontière du merveilleux*", the delirium of the harlequinade (1976, 541). More insidiously, he rides like a madman across precarious Irish land where "boggy holes of any depth, ranging between two feet and half-way to Australia", await his foolish followers (Somerville and Ross 1989a, 174). Leading the wild Irish hunt, Flurry effects a kind of madness with his whirling whip and devilish temper. Like an acrobat, he leaps stone walls and grassy banks, and like a chameleon,

he waits attendance on the highest and lowest of the land. He is the natural man in Arcadia who teaches his master, Major Yeates, a thing or two about country life. He is eminently adaptable, appearing in all sorts of situations in story after story and always coming up trumps. Florence McCarthy Knox is not a stage Irishman. He is much less, a mask reflecting distortedly warped versions of Anglo-Irish life. He is the product of pantomime and the result of caricature.

I have considered briefly the relationship of the Irish national character to theory on caricature and have proposed that harlequin gives shape, and a theatrical dimension, to the paradoxical elements I have outlined. Baudelaire describes pantomime as the essence of the comic, its "*l'épuration*" or distillation: "La pantomime est l'épuration de la comédie; c'en est al quintessence; c'est l'élément comique pur, dégagé et concentré" (540). If pantomime is the distillation of comedy, then harlequin, as the leader of that form, might be described as a distillation of Melmoth, the manifestation of the comic sense. So if Flurry Knox is harlequin in Ireland, his literary antecedent must be Melmoth of Maturin's novel. Both works belong to a tradition of European romantic irony and their use of caricature derives from this tradition. Somerville and Ross's short fiction does not so much represent Ireland as parade and stage it in the romantic ironist's fashion. Flurry, Slipper and Mrs. Cadogan are masks of masks. Their origins may indeed be the stage, but to say that they are merely stage-Irish (and to dismiss them as such) is to ignore the vitality of the world theatre that gives them shape.

NOTES

¹ See, for instance, Joseph Devlin's 1994 study of the writers' political stance. More recently at the 1999 WERCC Conference in Dublin, Pamela Weaver addressed questions of class and gender in the R. M. stories in (Weaver 1999).

² Frank O'Connor's dismissal of Somerville and Ross's short fiction as "school-girl high jinks" (1963, 36) may have been determined in part by their class. O'Connor would not have viewed Somerville and Ross as part of the submerged population groups who created the modern form.

³ In his three essays on caricature of which the first, "De l'essence du rire", posits theory, Baudelaire considers the significance of the images of French and foreign caricaturists of the nineteenth century.

⁴ See also Lady Morgan's (Sidney Owenson) *Florence Macarthy* for a similar explanation of the origins of Irish character. Florence Macarthy is reduced and altered by the extreme conditions of Irish life. As a result of such extremes, she possesses a chameleon character, ever-changing and ever-shifting, and she survives the "wild vicissitudes" of Ireland by slipping on

one mask after another (Morgan 1979 vol. III, 274). In his PhD study of Lady Morgan and other 19th century writers' use of Burkean notions on the sublime (and the relationship of the sublime to the Irish national character), Richard Haslam points out that Lady Morgan acquainted Salvator Rosa's "mysteriously sublime" works with Ireland and Claude Lorraine's landscapes with England. According to Morgan, says Haslam, the Irish character with its extreme pitches of feeling might also be described as sublime.

⁵ For a discussion of the self-consciousness and ambivalence of romantic irony, see Garber (1988).

⁶ In 1899, Martin Ross writes to Mrs. Cuthbert Dawson and refers to various French papers' attitudes to English involvement in the Boer War. The "better" French papers admit their mistake in initially attacking the English queen, while the *Patrie* and *Libre Parole*, the halfpenny papers, continue to attack the English. A satirical newspaper called *Rire* deserves special mentions for its "horrible" and "disgusting" caricatures from English history. Despite her distaste, Martin Ross evidently studied this subversive material before "consigning the whole thing to the stove" (Somerville and Ross 1918, 270).

⁷ An account of Robert Martin's involvement in theatre appears in his sister's original manuscript of "Memoir of Robert", edited by Edith Somerville for *Irish Memories* as "The Martins of Ross". The unedited version in the Manuscripts Department of Trinity College Library (no. 10844) is more about Dublin theatre, and Robert Martin's interest in burlesque and pantomime, than the final version suggests. Reviews of Robert Martin's *Bluebeard* appeared in *The Irish Times*, 13, 27, and 28 December 1886.

⁸ See the Martin Ross (Violet Martin)/William G. Wills correspondence in the Manuscripts Department of Queen's University Library. See also Freeman Wills's biography of his brother, *William G. Wills: Dramatist and Painter* (1898).

⁹ In *Harlequin in his Element*, David Mayer notes that English pantomime's use of the stage Irishman improved with Catholic emancipation in 1829. Initially, in Charles Farley's "Harlequin and Friar Bacon" in 1820, the drunken Irish characters of Donnybrook Fair appear solely in the harlequinade. In "Harlequin and the Eagle" of 1826, the Irish characters, Cormac and Mary, feature throughout the pantomime and change into Harlequin and Columbine later on. In "Harlequin Pat and Harlequin Bat" of 1830, "the Ireland of musical comedy and tourist brochures is complete". Brian Boru and his bride, Norma, are changed to Harlequin and Columbine by St. Patrick and the harlequin bat becomes the inevitable shillelagh (Mayer 1969, 245-56).

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The Use of Pantomime in Somerville and Ross's Irish R. M. Stories

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