Part V

The Adventures of Miss Sophia Berkley essentially rejects the notion of a union with a foreign interloper and prefers one with Horatio, the representative of the Irish Anglican ruling class (though tellingly in its liberal guise), which is at this stage in its history becoming rather more tolerant towards Catholics (though not to Catholicism). Union with the stranger is configured as what Jim Hansen has called a ‘Gothic Marriage’ where Ireland is ‘the confined, threatened, terrorized female as England became . . . her terrorizing, avaricious, and lustful captor-husband. From the perspective of an Irish political consciousness, the Gothic is born where the domestic affection metaphor miscarries’.\(^{84}\) The key point here is that the author of Sophia Berkley rejects one kind of marriage as a sham and pretence – the very version of marriage that would eventually come to be seen, in both the Act of Union and the later national novel, as the solution to the constant difficulties in the relationship between Ireland and England – and suggests that a completely different marriage is preferable. In this, the author anticipates the views of anti-unionist figures towards the end of the century.\(^{85}\) For a while, the fate of Sophia Berkley looks grim: her proper suitor has been either killed or abducted (just as it seemed to many that Patriot opinion had been destroyed during the Money Bill dispute and the subsequent debate on a potential union), and she is prey to the attentions of a rival suitor who has only her worst interests at heart. Sophia’s abductor talks constantly of his respect for her and his love and what he will do for her future prosperity, but this rhetoric of love and affection masks his true rapacity and his real desire to have his way with her without making any real commitments. Such a union, as its mid-century detractors never tired of pointing out, was never going to be between equals and was not one which would have mutual benefits for both; instead it promised to be a profoundly unequal one based on threats, violence and disorder. Poor Sophie has no one to protect her, given her orphan status, but while Swift fails to make the Injured Lady a figure of power like the versions of a female Ireland found in the aisling tradition, the author of Sophia Berkley does make her heroine into an agent in her own destiny.

Sophia is saved, ultimately, not only by her own ingenuity and willpower but by the return of her saviour – not the Pretender, but Anglican, Patriot, Ireland, not vanquished, only misled for a while by ruffians and pirates. Sophia Berkley thus rejects what would become the standard narrative arc of the national novel at the end of the century (even if that
arc is less straightforward than many critics appear to assume). In reading the ‘union’ fiction of the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, Seamus Deane convicts it of liberalism, or at least a liberalism that is ultimately tied up in imperial and colonial politics. The national novel, in his reading, is a genre which attempts to convince its British readers that Ireland is cultured and alterable, capable of change and modification, capable of entering fully into modernity, and also that the Union will be worth it in the end. For Irish Anglican readers, the national novel tries to convince them that while Catholicism is, of course, an atavistic religion, particular Irish Catholics are not monsters and can be fully incorporated into the political nation and perhaps eventually convinced to give up their tenacious grip on their religion if their fellow countrymen and women show them some kindness.

Tolerance and conciliation are the key words here, although in Deane’s analysis this kind of liberal unionism is inherently suspicious. The ‘happy bourgeois family . . . becomes the model for colonizer– colonized relationships’. The national marriage ‘glosses over the contradictions, the inequalities, concealed in the institution of marriage itself . . . disguising the asymmetries encompassed within the trope of a “balanced” order’. In Sophia Berkley there is no such glossing over, and the question of consent is highlighted and emphasised in a powerful way. Moreover, the Anglo-Irish marriage never takes place and instead Sophia returns to her first love, who only appeared to have abandoned her. In never becoming a direct allegory of the Irish Anglican experience, Sophia Berkley retains an interpretive and signifying capaciousness that would be somewhat lost when the national novel emerged as it was more tied to direct allegory than earlier fiction. Even more importantly, Sophia Berkley demonstrates that far from being a genre trying to evade meaning, the Gothic is sometimes rather too meaningful and only a complete immersion in the contemporary literature helps in the interpretive project. One of these many meanings is that it is no longer appropriate to stereotype Catholics as monstrous villains without any redeeming features, and this unmonstering process proved a very difficult task for the early Irish Gothic novel, to which I now turn.