
Maria Edgeworth, *The Absentee*

FULL of what he had heard, and impatient to obtain farther information respecting the state of his father's affairs, lord Colambre hastened home; but his father was out, and his mother was engaged with Mr. Soho, directing, or rather being directed, how her apartments should be fitted up for her gala. As lord Colambre entered the room, he saw his mother, miss Nugent, and Mr. Soho, standing at a large table, which was covered with rolls of paper, patterns, and drawings of furniture: Mr. Soho was speaking in a conceited, dictatorial tone, asserting that there was no "colour in nature for that room equal to *the belly-o'-the fawn*;" which *belly-o'-the fawn* he so pronounced, that lady Clonbrony understood it to be *la belle uniforme*, and, under this mistake, repeated and assented

to the assertion, till it was set to rights, with condescending superiority, by the upholsterer. This first architectural upholsterer of the age, as he styled himself, and was universally admitted to be by all the world of fashion, then, with full powers given to him, spoke *en maître*. The whole face of things must be changed. There must be new hangings, new draperies, new cornices, new candelabras, new every thing!—

“The upholsterer’s eye, in fine frenzy rolling,
Glances from ceiling to floor, from floor to ceiling;
And, as imagination bodies forth
The form of things unknown, the upholsterer’s pencil
Turns them to shape, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a NAME.”¹

Of the value of a NAME no one could be more sensible than Mr. Soho.

“Your la’ship sees²—this is merely a scratch of my pencil. Your la’ship’s sensible—just to give you an idea of the shape, the form of the thing. You fill up your angles³ here with *encoinières*⁴—round your walls with the *Turkish tent drapery*—a fancy of my own—in apricot cloth, or crimson velvet, suppose, or, *en flute*,⁵ in crimson satin draperies, fanned and riched with gold fringes, *en suite*⁶—intermediate spaces, Apollo’s heads with gold rays—and here, ma’am, you place four *chancelières*,⁷ with chimeras⁸ at the corners, covered with blue silk and silver fringe, elegantly fanciful—with my STATIRA CANOPY here—light blue silk draperies—aërial tint,⁹ with silver balls—and for seats here, the

¹ “*The upholsterers’ eye . . . NAME.*”: parody of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, v. i. 12–17:
The poet’s eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

The satirical substitution of upholsterer for poet leads on to themes—local habitation and the significance of names—which acquire a realistic significance in the novel.*

² *Your la’ship sees . . .*: Soho’s rhodomontade, as Edgeworth calls it, is a display case of trade jargon used to flatter Lady Clonbrony. While the descriptions of decor for each room may not have been excessively fanciful given the contemporary taste for the exotic, the collective effect is grotesquely excessive.*

³ *angles*: corners.*

⁴ *encoinières*: pieces of furniture made with an angle to fit into a corner.*

⁵ *en flute*: fluted, in ruffles.*

⁶ *en suite*: in harmony.*

⁷ *chancelières*: footmuffs; cushions (or perhaps boxes) furred on the inside and with an opening on one side.*

⁸ *chimeras*: grotesque monsters composed of parts of various animals.*

⁹ *aërial tint*: atmospheric blue.*

SERAGLIO¹⁰ OTTOMANS, superfine scarlet—your paws¹¹ griffin—golden—and golden tripods, here, with antique cranes—and oriental alabaster tables here and there—quite appropriate, your la’ship feels.

“And let me reflect. For the next apartment, it strikes me—as your la’ship don’t value expence—the *Alhambra*¹² hangings—my own thought entirely—Now, before I unrol them, lady Clonbrony, I must beg you’ll not mention I’ve shown them. I give you my sacred honour, not a soul has set eye upon the Alhambra hangings except Mrs. Dareville, who stole a peep; I refused, absolutely refused, the duchess of Torcaster—but I can’t refuse your la’ship—So see, ma’am—(unrolling them)—scagliola¹³ porphyry¹⁴ columns supporting the grand dome—entablature,¹⁵ silvered and decorated with imitative bronze ornaments: under the entablature, a *valance in pelmets*, of puffed scarlet silk, would have an unparalleled grand effect, seen through the arches—with the TREBISOND¹⁶ TRELICE PAPER, would make a *tout ensemble*, novel beyond example. On that trebisond trellice paper, I confess, ladies, I do pique myself.¹⁷

“Then, for the little room, I recommend turning it temporarily into a Chinese pagoda, with this *Chinese pagoda paper*, with the *porcelain border*, and josses,¹⁸ and jars, and beakers, to match; and I can venture to promise one vase of pre-eminent size and beauty.—O, indubitably! if your la’ship prefers it, you can have the *Egyptian hieroglyphic paper*, with the *ibis border* to match!—The only objection is, one sees it everywhere—quite antediluvian—gone to the hotels even; but, to be sure, if your la’ship has a fancy—at all events, I humbly recommend, what her grace of Torcaster longs to patronize, my MOON CURTAINS, with candlelight draperies. A demi-saison¹⁹ elegance this—I hit off yesterday—and—True, your la’ship’s quite correct—out of the common completely. And, of course, you’d have the *sphynx candelabras*, and the phoenix

¹⁰ SERAGLIO: Turkish apartments reserved for wives and concubines.*

¹¹ *your paws*: here, Soho’s string of exotic technical names and devices suddenly admits the familiar possessive adjective—this is part of his condescending attitude towards Lady Clonbrony—which has the satiric effect of linking her to the composite monsters or griffins whose paws are really indicated.*

¹² *Alhambra*: palace of Moorish kings at Granada.*

¹³ *scagliola*: (from the Italian), plaster work designed to imitate types of stone.*

¹⁴ *porphyry*: deep red and white stone, associated with the orient.*

¹⁵ *entablature*: the part of an architectural order (or series of mouldings) which is above the column, including architrave, frieze, and cornice.*

¹⁶ TREBISOND: (modern-day Trabizon), a Turkish city.*

¹⁷ *pique myself*: pride myself on.*

¹⁸ *josses*: Chinese figures of deities.*

¹⁹ *demi-saison*: style intermediate between past and coming season of fashion.*

argands²⁰ O! nothing else lights now, ma'am!—Expence!—Expence of the whole!—Impossible to calculate here on the spot!—but nothing at all worth your ladyship's consideration!"

At another moment, lord Colambre might have been amused with all this rhodomontade, and with the airs and voluble conceit of the orator; but, after what he had heard at Mr. Mordicai's, this whole scene struck him more with melancholy than with mirth. He was alarmed by the prospect of new and unbounded expence; provoked, almost past enduring, by the jargon and impertinence of this upholsterer; mortified and vexed to the heart, to see his mother the dupe, the sport of such a coxcomb.

"Prince of puppies!—Insufferable!—My own mother!" lord Colambre repeated to himself, as he walked hastily up and down the room.

"Colambre, won't you let us have your judgment—your *teeste*?" said his mother.

"Excuse me, ma'am—I have no taste, no judgment, in these things."

[. . .]

THE opening of her gala, the display of her splendid reception rooms, the Turkish tent, the Alhambra, the pagoda, formed a proud moment to lady Clonbrony. Much did she enjoy, and much too naturally, notwithstanding all her efforts to be stiff and stately, much too naturally did she show her enjoyment of the surprise excited in some and affected by others on their first entrance.

One young, very young lady expressed her astonishment so audibly as to attract the notice of all the bystanders. Lady Clonbrony, delighted, seized both her hands, shook them, and laughed heartily; then, as the young lady with her party passed on, her ladyship recovered herself, drew up her head, and said to the company near her, "Poor thing! I hope I covered her little *naïveté* properly. How NEW she must be!"

Then, with well practised dignity, and half subdued self complacency of aspect, her ladyship went gliding about—most importantly busy, introducing my lady *this* to the sphynx candelabra, and my lady *that* to the Trebisond trellice; placing some delightfully for the perspective of the Alhambra; establishing others quite to her satisfaction on seraglio ottomans; and honouring others with a seat under the statira canopy. Receiving and answering compliments from successive crowds, of select friends, imagining herself the mirror of fashion, and the admiration of the whole world, lady Clonbrony was, for her hour, as happy certainly as ever woman was in similar circumstances.

²⁰ *argands*: lamps with cylindrical wick, invented in 1782.*

Her son looked at her, and wished that this happiness could last. Naturally inclined to sympathy, lord Colambre reproached himself for not feeling as gay at this instant as the occasion required. But the festive scene, the blazing lights, the “universal hubbub,”²¹ failed to raise his spirits. As a dead weight upon them hung the remembrance of Mordicai’s denunciations; and, through the midst of this eastern magnificence, this unbounded profusion, he thought he saw future domestic misery and ruin to those he loved best in the world.

[. . .]

[. . .] How transient are all human joys, especially those of vanity! Even on this long meditated, this long desired, this gala night, lady Clonbrony found her triumph incomplete—inadequate to her expectations. For the first hour all had been compliment, success, and smiles; presently came the *buts*, and the hesitated objections, and the “damning with faint praise”²² all *that* could be borne—every body has his taste—and one person’s taste is as good as another’s; and while she had Mr. Soho to cite, lady Clonbrony thought she might be well satisfied. But she could not be satisfied with colonel Heathcock, who, dressed in black, had stretched his “fashionable length of limb” under the statira canopy, upon the snow-white swan down couch. When, after having monopolised attention, and been the subject of much bad wit, about black swans and rare birds, and swans being geese and geese being swans, the colonel condescended to rise, and, as Mrs. Dareville said, to vacate his couch—that couch was no longer white—the black impression of the colonel remained on the sullied snow.

“Eh, now! really didn’t recollect I was in black,” was all the apology he made. Lady Clonbrony was particularly vexed that the appearance of the statira canopy should be spoiled before the effect had been seen by lady Pocke, and lady Chatterton, and lady G——, lady P——, and the duke of V——, and a party of superlative fashionables, who had promised *to look in upon her*, but who, late as it was, had not yet arrived. They came in at last. But lady Clonbrony had no reason to regret for their sake the statira couch. It would have been lost upon them, as was every thing else which she had prepared with so much pains and cost to

²¹ “*universal hubbub*”: Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ii. 951. In her notes to *Mary Leadbeater’s Cottage Dialogues* (1811) Edgeworth glosses ‘hubbub’ as a Miltonic word, and cites this line. In fact, hubbub dates back to the sixteenth century (Holinshed and Spenser) when it seems to have been a term for what was thought a characteristically Irish cry, cf. Barnaby Rich’s *The Irish Hubbub: or the English Hue and Cry* (1617).*

²² “*damning with faint praise*”: the phrase dates back at least as far as William Wycherley (1640?–1716): see the prologue to *The Plain Dealer*: ‘And with faint praises one another damn’.*

excite their admiration. They came resolute not to admire. Skilled in the art of making others unhappy, they just looked round with an air of apathy.—“Ah! you’ve had Soho!—Soho has done wonders for you here!—Vastly well!—Vastly well!—Soho’s very clever in his way!”

Others of great importance came in, full of some slight accident that had happened to themselves, or their horses, or their carriages; and, with privileged selfishness, engrossed the attention of all within their sphere of conversation. Well, lady Clonbrony got over all this, and got over the history of a letter about a chimney that was on fire, a week ago, at the duke of V——’s old house, in Brecknockshire. In gratitude for the smiling patience with which she listened to him, his grace of V——fixed his glass to look at the Alhambra, and had just pronounced it to be “Well!—Very well!” when the dowager lady Chatterton made a terrible discovery—a discovery that filled lady Clonbrony with astonishment and indignation—Mr. Soho had played her false! What was her mortification, when the dowager assured her that these identical Alhambra hangings had not only been shown by Mr. Soho to the duchess of Torcaster, but that her grace had had the refusal of them, and had actually criticised them, in consequence of sir Horace Grant, the great traveller’s objecting to some of the proportions of the pillars—Soho had engaged to make a new set, vastly improved, by sir Horace’s suggestions, for her grace of Torcaster.

[. . .]

All who secretly envied or ridiculed lady Clonbrony enjoyed this scene. The Alhambra hangings, which had been in one short hour before the admiration of the world, were now regarded by every eye with contempt, as *cast* hangings, and every tongue was busy declaiming against Mr. Soho; every body declared, that from the first, the want of proportion “struck them, but that they would not mention it till others found it out.”

People usually revenge themselves for having admired too much, by afterwards despising and depreciating without mercy—in all great assemblies the perception of ridicule is quickly caught, and quickly too revealed. Lady Clonbrony, even in her own house, on her gala night, became an object of ridicule,—decently masked, indeed, under the appearance of condolence with her ladyship, and of indignation against “that abominable Mr. Soho!”

[. . .]

Some hits, sufficiently palpable,²³ however, are recorded for the advantage of posterity. When lady Clonbrony led her to look at the Chinese pagoda, the lady [Mrs. Dareville] paused, with her foot on the threshold,

²³ *Some hits, sufficiently palpable*: again *Hamlet*; see V. ii. 295: ‘A hit, a very palpable hit’.*

as if afraid to enter this porcelain Elysium, as she called it—Fool’s Paradise, she would have said; and, by her hesitation, and by the half pronounced word, suggested the idea,—“None but belles without petticoats can enter here,” said she, drawing her clothes tight round her; “fortunately, I have but two, and lady Langdale has but one.” Prevailed upon to venture in, she walked on with prodigious care and trepidation, affecting to be alarmed at the crowd of strange forms and monsters by which she was surrounded.

“Not a creature here that I ever saw before in nature!—Well, now I may boast I’ve been in a real Chinese pagoda!”

“Why yes, every thing is appropriate here, I flatter myself,” said lady Clonbrony.

“And how good of you, my dear lady Clonbrony, in defiance of bulls and blunders,²⁴ to allow us a comfortable English fireplace and plenty of Newcastle coal in China!²⁵ And a white marble—no! white velvet hearthrug painted with beautiful flowers—O! the delicate, the *useful* thing!”

Vexed by the emphasis on the word *useful*, lady Clonbrony endeavoured to turn off the attention of the company. “Lady Langdale, your ladyship’s a judge of china—this vase is an unique, I am told.”

“I am told,” interrupted Mrs. Dareville, “this is the very vase in which B——, the nabob’s father, who was, you know, a China captain, smuggled his dear little Chinese wife and all her fortune out of Canton—positively, actually put the lid on, packed her up, and sent her off on shipboard!—True! true! upon my veracity! I’ll tell you my authority!”

With this story, Mrs. Dareville drew all attention from the jar, to lady Clonbrony’s infinite mortification.

Lady Langdale at length turned to look at a vast range of china jars.

“Ali Baba and the forty thieves!” exclaimed Mrs. Dareville: “I hope you have boiling oil ready!”

Lady Clonbrony was obliged to laugh, and to vow that Mrs. Dareville was uncommon pleasant to-night—“But now,” said her ladyship, “let me take you to the Turkish tent.”

Having with great difficulty got the malicious wit out of the pagoda and into the Turkish tent, lady Clonbrony began to breathe more freely; for here she thought she was upon safe ground:—“Every thing, I flatter myself,” said she, “is correct, and appropriate, and quite picturesque”—

²⁴ *bulls and blunders*: an insistent identification of Lady Clonbrony as Irish is effected through ‘bulls’, thought to be a distinctively Irish form of verbal error. Edgeworth and her father wrote an extensive study of language, *Essay on Irish Bulls*, in 1802.*

²⁵ *English fireplace . . . in China*, perhaps this prepares the way for Edgeworth’s very subversive allusion to a pamphlet, ‘An Intercepted Letter from China.*’

The Royal Pavilion at Brighton

The company, dispersed in happy groups, or reposing on seraglio ottomans, drinking lemonade and sherbet—beautiful Fatimas²⁶ admiring, or being admired—“Every thing here quite correct, appropriate, and picturesque,” repeated Mrs. Dareville.

Source: Maria Edgeworth, *The Absentee*, W. J. McCormack and Kim Walker, eds, *Oxford World's Classics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1988, pp. 12–14, 27–8, 33–7.