Rereading the Mother in Edna O’Brien’s *Saints and Sinners*

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Mother-daughter relations have always been a central concern in Edna O’Brien’s fiction. In her first novel, *The Country Girls*, Caithleen’s strong bond with her long-suffering mother is abruptly broken off by the mother’s death by drowning, which haunts the girl for the rest of her life and eventually leads her to repeat the same fate.¹ In stories such as “Cords” and “Sister Imelda,” the young girl’s symbiotic closeness with the mother becomes suffocating and the daughter makes a desperate bid for freedom, while the ultimate impossibility of that escape causes terrifying dreams of matricide in “A Rose in the Heart of New York.” As several critics have observed, the mother-daughter bond is always riddled with tension in O’Brien’s fiction, with the daughter struggling between a need for nurturance and a desire for autonomy. As Patricia Coughlan has put it:

> Sharply conflicted, it [the mother-daughter bond] involves opposite imperatives: in one direction to escape, to form, and free the separate self and disavow the maternal other, and in the other to remain attached, to resist at all costs the process of detachment from and relinquishing of the mother, and indeed to long for a total (re)union with her. This longing is exceptionally strong in the universe of O’Brien’s fictions, and I see it as an instance of that desire for fusion with the other, overriding the aim of individuation. (187)

While the similarities between these fictional mother-daughter plots and O’Brien’s own troubled relationship with her mother have often been commented on, it is also clear that these strained mother-daughter relations fit in with larger trends in Western literature. Luce Irigaray has famously argued that “the whole of our western culture is based upon the murder of the mother,” which makes it almost impossible for women to gain a secure identity in the symbolic order and leaves them in a state of “dereliction” (Reader 47).² Adrienne Rich has claimed similarly that “the loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy” (237). In her classic study, *The Mother-Daughter Plot. Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (1988), Marianne Hirsch has analysed the fraught relations between mothers and daughters as represented in novels

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by women writers. Common elements in the texts she analyses are the daughter's ambivalent feelings of fear and anger: "fears of maternal power and [...] anger at maternal powerlessness" (167), inspired by the paradoxical combination of the myth of the omnipotent, devouring mother and the reality of the mother's submissiveness in a patriarchal society. In an Irish context, the difficulties of daughterly development in a patriarchal culture as described by Hirsch, have been exacerbated by the idealised images of the mother in the discourses of nationalism and Catholicism, which have so strongly shaped Irish culture. To the mythic image of the carnivorous mother—which many of Hirsch's texts bear witness to—has been added the image of the sacrificial, suffering mother, inspired by the idealised figures of Mother Ireland and the Virgin Mary. Both of these mythic images—the self-denying, sacrificial saint and the overbearing, devouring monster—have left their mark on representations of mother-daughter relations in twentieth-century Irish fiction. Irish critics have in fact been unanimous in their characterisation of these relations as "embattled" (Chang 54), “difficult and acrimonious” (Weekes 120), “inveterately divided and strained” (Fogarty 88), riddled by tensions and “rivalries” (Shumaker 83), or characterised by “mutual hostility and conflict” (Ingman 76). Recurrent elements are matrophobia and matricide, anger and resentment at the mother's powerlessness and her failure to shield or empower the daughter. As Fogarty points out, many Irish stories and novels “depict the desperate struggle of the daughter to avoid the trap of female subjugation and the calamity of duplicating the mother’s experience” (113).

In all of these critical studies, moreover, O'Brien’s stories and novels are turned to for primary evidence of the embattled mother-daughter bond. What makes O'Brien's texts particularly rewarding in this respect, is that they often explicitly refer to the larger cultural context in Ireland. In Mother Ireland, O'Brien hints at the pervasiveness of this myth in Irish society and the dedication of The Light of Evening—“For my mother and my motherland”—connects the personal story of the novel to the discourses of myth and national identity. The abundant Catholic imagery in O'Brien's work also serves to associate her self-denying martyr-mothers with the Catholic idealisation of a motherhood characterised by “purity, asexuality, and self-denying devotion to others” (Fogarty 87). Or as Ann Owens Weekes has put it, a typical O'Brien mother “adheres rigidly to rural Catholic mores; receives and, as a later daughter recognizes, gives no sexual pleasure; and ultimately succumbs to a hopeless fatalism” (109).

Traces of these maternal myths can also be found in O'Brien's most recent collection, Saints and Sinners, which received the prestigious Frank O'Connor Short Story Award in 2011. The opening story, “Shovel Kings,” for instance, features an ageing London Irishman who keeps pining for the home he had to leave behind as a young boy. Yet when he is finally given the opportunity to return, his motherland feels empty now that his beloved mother is dead—killed, he believes, by his father who “had worn her out” (Saints and Sinners 19). In “Sinners,” the self-denying mother-myth is exposed as alien and repressive when a lonely widow, whose five children have dispersed, comes to confront her own emotional and sexual starvation through the—imagined—lewd behaviour of some of her lodgers. “Green Georgette,” on the other hand, tells of a visit of a mother and daughter to the wife of the town’s banker. Although they have high hopes for the visit, as it would raise their status in the community, it turns out a disappointment since they have only been asked to cover up the woman’s flirtations with the local doctor. “My Two Mothers,” finally, features the familiar, long-suffering O'Brien mother from the
perspective of the daughter who dwells on the story of her mother’s life after the latter’s
death. Almost all reviewers of *Saints and Sinners* note the repetition of “old O’Brien
themes” (Kilroy), of “places and people from earlier books” in the stories (Shillinger). As
Aisling Foster writes in *The Times*: “Some writers, like painters, return to the same subject
again and again. Edna O’Brien is that kind of artist.” In this collection, she “returns to the
theme of sexual repression and motherhood that marked her early works.”

“Green Georgette” and “My Two Mothers” are the stories which perhaps most explicitly
revisit the mother–daughter plots of O’Brien’s earlier fiction. The high hopes turned sour
of “Green Georgette” recall similar stories of disappointment in “The Rug” or “A Demon,”
and the daughterly development sketched in “My Two Mothers” echoes that of “Cords,”
“A Rose in the Heart of New York” and *The Light of Evening*, where an early, symbiotic
mother–daughter bond is replaced by hostility and hatred, which fail to be fully overcome
in subsequent efforts at reconciliation. In spite of these familiar ingredients, however, the
tone and atmosphere of “Green Georgette” and “My Two Mothers” are markedly different
from the far more negative and fatalistic mood of the earlier stories. In this essay,
therefore, I propose to analyse these stories more in detail so as to account for this
change in tone. I will argue that the stories do not so much repeat the mother–daughter
plot of earlier stories as rewrite this plot through a remarkable rereading of the figure of
the mother. Although this rereading could again be linked up with O’Brien’s own personal
development, in the last part of this essay I will rather place it in the context of similar
developments that mark the representation of mother–daughter relations in the short
fiction of other Irish women writers, notably Anne Enright and Claire Keegan. I will argue
that all of these stories respond in various ways to Irigaray’s plea for new symbolisations
of the mother–daughter relationship.

At first sight, “Green Georgette” is a story of dashed hopes and expectations of a kind
with such famous stories as “The Rug,” “Irish Revel” and “A Demon.” In these stories,
dreams and hopes of mother and/or daughter are briefly raised by a luxurious rug, an
invitation to a party or a day’s outing, yet these never meet the high expectations, and
the stories typically end on a note of resignation or depression. In “Green Georgette,”
the mother’s desire for social status and recognition and the daughter’s longing for glamour
and romance come together in their careful preparations for the visit to Mrs Coughlan
who, as the young narrator puts it, “is the cynosure of all” (*Saints* 112). Other familiar
elements in the story are the mother’s reminiscences of a stay in America before she
married, her hard work on the farm and her tireless serving of a lazy husband, who is
prone to “tantrums” and “drinking sprees” (*Saints* 115). Still, this *Saints and Sinners* story
also differs from the earlier stories in significant ways. What stands out, first of all, is the
peculiar use of tense and narrative voice in the story. The first section of the story,
entitled “Thursday,” is told by a first-person narrator in the present tense: “Mama and I
have been invited to the Coughlans. It is to be Sunday evening at seven o’clock. I imagine
us setting out in good time…” (*Saints* 111). Although the narrator also dwells on the
Coughlans’ presence in the village and on how the “miracle” of the invitation came about,
she mostly speculates on what the visit will be like, the dresses they will wear, what her
mother will say and do:

*Mama says I am to wear my green knitted dress with the scalloped angora edging
and carry my cardigan in case it gets chilly on the way home. […] She herself is
going to wear her tweedex suit—a fawn, flecked with pink, one that she knitted for
an entire winter. I know in her heart that she hopes the conversation will get
around to the fact of her knitting it. Indeed, if it is admired, she will probably offer
to knit one for Mrs Coughlan. She is like that. Certainly she will make Drew a gift of a wallet, or a rug, as she goes to the new technical school at night to master these skills. Nothing would please her more than that they would become friends, the Coughlans coming to us and a big spread of cakes and buns and sausage rolls and caramel custards in their own individual ramekins. (115)

The second part of the story, “Sunday,” chronicles the facts of the visit in the past tense: “We went” (166). Although the tense-switch heightens the contrast between the bright hopes of the first part and the disappointments of the second, it cannot entirely dispel these hopes and longings. Indeed, their vivid rendering in the present and future tense makes them outshine the disappointment. This is further confirmed when the future tense returns in the evocation of a new desire and promise at the story’s close. O’Brien’s earlier stories, by contrast, are typically framed by disappointment as the initial hopes and longings are already formulated in a past tense, which implies their essential futility: “Irish Revel” opens symbolically and ominously with “Mary hoped that the rotted front tire would not burst” (Fanatic 177) and in “The Rug,” the first-person narrator starts her reminiscence of the rug with the comment that the smell of new linoleum makes her “both a little disturbed and sad” (Fanatic 199).

The narrative set-up of “Green Georgette,” on the other hand, serves to highlight the hopes and desires of mother and daughter, with the girl interpreting her mother’s secret dreams of friendship, hospitality and recognition. In fact, both are united by a love of good clothes, nice food and glamour, and even though the mother does not give in to the daughter’s “insatiable longing for tinned peaches” upon their return, she does “promis[e] that we would have them some Sunday with an orange soufflé, which she had just mastered the recipe for” (Saints 124). The disappointment of the visit is thus already partly reversed by a new hope or promise, significantly involving food, the enjoyment of which binds mother and daughter together. The ending of the “The Rug,” by contrast, only serves to confirm the disappointment: “As she watched him go down the avenue she wept, not so much for the loss—though the loss was enormous—as for her own foolishness in thinking that someone had wanted to do her a kindness at last. “We live and learn,” she said, as she undid her apron strings, out of habit, and then retied them, slowly and methodically, making a tighter knot” (Fanatic 206). The tighter knot aptly sums up the suffering, self-denying mother of O’Brien’s early stories, who seeks to suppress the body and its desires, finally succumbing to fatalism, for as the mother in “A Demon” complains, “whenever she looked forward to anything it was always botched” (Lantern 134).

Although traces of that self-denial are left in the mother of “Green Georgette,” the narrator mostly foregrounds her mother’s warmth and generosity, the pleasure she takes in small luxuries such as soft clothes and delicious food—“Mama’s cakes [...] were dusted with caster sugar or a soft-boiled icing that literally melted on the tongue” (Saints 119). There is nothing sinful about food—or the desire for it—in “Green Georgette” and again, that makes for a difference with an earlier story such as “A Demon” where the daughter “offered to make a sacrifice” if the car, which was supposed to drive them on their trip, came after all: “she would not eat apple tart, she would also decline lemonade if it was offered her, and that night, when they got home, she would get out of bed at least ten times to say several Our Fathers, Hail Marys, and Glorias” (Lantern 135). The title of that story also alludes to the demonization of the female body as something that has to be repressed or covered up.
A final difference from the earlier stories concerns the relationship between mother and daughter in “Green Georgette.” As we have seen, mother and daughter are very close; they share similar likes and dislikes, hopes and disappointments, moving from “Our being invited is a miracle” to “We were in a gloom” (Saints 113, 124). Still, the daughter’s predictions of her mother’s behaviour in the lengthy passage quoted above also signal an awareness of her mother as a separate person. Moreover, in her account of the visit the narrator expresses slight annoyance at her mother’s compliance: “Normally she was reserved but her yearning to form a friendship had made her over-accommodating” (Saints 120), or “She was too conciliatory, even though she was rattled within” (Saints 124). The final lines of the story further highlight the difference between mother and daughter, with the mother taking comfort in the promise of an orange soufflé and the daughter praying “for drastic things to occur—for the bullocks to rise up in mutiny, then gone one another, for my father to die in his sleep, for our school to catch fire, and for Mr Coughlan to take a pistol and shoot his wife, before shooting himself” (Saints 125). Unlike the symbiotic but suffocating mother-daughter relations in several of O’Brien’s early stories, I would argue, the relationship between mother and daughter in “Green Georgette” is characterised by both similarity and difference, by closeness and distance, by mutual understanding and respect. The narrator knows and understands her mother’s desires and disappointments, shares some of them, and ultimately diverges from them, without, however, entirely tearing herself away from the mother in the process. Instead of the pathological mother-daughter evoked in most of O’Brien’s fiction, “Green Georgette” depicts what Jessica Benjamin has called an “intersubjective relation” in which the daughter no longer sees the mother as an object, whether of fantasy, need or blame. Instead, she recognises her as a subject, “as different and yet alike,” as “an other who is capable of sharing similar mental experience” (Benjamin 22). Indeed, as we have seen, the mother is primarily characterised as a desiring subject in her own right, even though her yearnings are more conventional and domestic than the romantic and rebellious dreams of the daughter.

The challenge of seeing the mother as a subject is also raised in “My Two Mothers.” The duality evoked in the title refers first of all to the opposition between the narrator’s ugly dreams of her mother and the reality of their past together: “In dream my mother and I are enemies, whereas in life we were so attached we could almost be called lovers” (Saints 169). And the story goes on to characterise the trajectory from symbiosis—“we were inseparable” (Saints 173)—through separation and estrangement to attempts at reconciliation—a trajectory which is highly familiar to readers of O’Brien’s and which has perhaps most compellingly been dramatized in “A Rose at the Heart of New York.” Again however, a closer consideration of these stories reveals many interesting differences between “A Rose” and its more recent retelling.

In the story, the two mothers of the title are also identified as “real mother and archetypal mother”—a duality which characterises most mothers in O’Brien’s fiction, who are represented as actual mothers and as instantiations of the archetypal images of Mother Ireland and/or the Virgin Mother. As if to underline that mythic dimension, the characters in “A Rose” remain nameless; they are referred to as “the mother” and “the girl.” In the harrowing birthing scene which opens that story, moreover, the “poor poor mother” is cast as a veritable sacrificial figure (Fanatic 375): brutalised by her husband (“prized apart [...] rammed through and told to open up” [Fanatic 376]), worn down by domestic drudgery, and now bloodied and wounded, symbolically linked to the half-
cooked goose the drunken men downstairs have torn apart. The rather overblown imagery of the first pages connects the mother not just with the Virgin Mary but also with Christ: “The mother roared again and said this indeed was her vinegar and gall. She bit into the crucifix and dent it further. She could feel her mouth and eyelids being stitched, too; she was no longer a lovely body, she was a vehicle for pain and insult” (Fanatic 379). How different then, the much more personal tone of “My Two Mothers” in which the first-person narrator recalls very specific details about her mother:

> Her fingers and nails smelt of food—meal for hen and chickens, gruel for calves and bread for us—whereas her body smelt of myriad things, depending on whether she was happy or unhappy, and the most pleasant was a lingering smell of a perfume from the cotton wad that she sometimes tucked under her brassiere. At Christmas time it was a smell of fruitcake soaked with grog and the sugary smell of white icing, stiff as starch, which she applied with the rapture of an artist. (Saints 169)

As in “Green Georgette,” the mother is depicted as warm and generous, with a love of food, clothes and luxuries, shared by the daughter. On summer evenings, they put on their best clothes and take a walk:

> Those walks bordered on enchantment, what with neighbours in some sudden comraderie, greeting us profusely, and always, irrationally, the added possibility that we might walk out of our old sad existence [...] On those walks she invariably spoke of visitors that were bound to come in the summer and the dainty dishes she would prepare for them. There was a host of recipes she had not yet tried. (Saints 171).

If in “A Rose” and other stories the early, symbiotic mother-daughter bond is also often characterised by a shared love of food or glamour, these enjoyments invariably come with strictures: the girl’s enjoyment of an orange cake her mother has made elicits the warning that she’ll get fat (Fanatic 384); a gift of a “most beautiful lipstick in a ridged gold case” is admired and enjoyed for a while, but then shut away in its case where it “dried out and developed a peculiar shape” (Fanatic 388). The emphasis in these stories is on self-denial, inspired by religious beliefs and hard necessity, whereas the emphasis in “Green Georgette” and “My Two Mothers” is on small pleasures and enjoyment in spite of harsh circumstances.

Still, in “My Two Mothers” too this childhood happiness is followed by a period of rebellion and escape on the part of the daughter and of disappointment on the part of the mother, who disapproves of her daughter’s writing, her marriage and subsequent divorce. As in “A Rose,” further, the narrator seeks reconciliation by splitting the mother into an apparent and a hidden figure. In “A Rose,” the daughter hopes to unearth “a long-sustained hidden passion” of the mother. Unearthing this secret self, she believes, will allow them “to be true at last,” with no more need to “hide from one another’s gaze” (Fanatic 398). In fact, the daughter hopes that this discovery will expose a fundamental similarity between her mother and herself, which will lead the mother to finally accept her daughter and the life of passion she has lead. Yet, the mother quells all such hopes when she sternly states that “there was no such thing as love between the sexes [...] there was only one kind of love and that was a mother’s love for her child” (Fanatic 399).

In “My Two Mothers” too, the narrator senses a “secret” inside her mother which she hopes to uncover (Saints 175). Significantly, the secret is linked both to a lost child—a pregnancy aborted in ominous circumstances—and to a lost sweetheart. Unlike the girl in “A Rose,” moreover, the narrator does not try to pry the secret from her mother in a conversation. Instead, she seeks to find this secret self, this “hidden room,” through acts
of rereading. She rereads both her own memories of her mothers and the hundreds of letters her mother has sent her over the years. “Her letters were deeper, sadder than I remembered,” writes the narrator, “but what struck me most was their hunger and their thirst” (Saints 175). What the narrator uncovers in these letters are her mother’s wishes and desires—for a trip to London, for her daughter’s return, for a chandelier or newly made jam she can offer to her daughter (“Her letter kept wishing that she could hand me a pot of clear jelly over a hedge and see me taste and swallow it” [Saints 176-77]). Going back through her memories yields a similar image of her mother as a desiring subject. “It was clear,” the narrator now understands, “from a little shiver in her body in which desire and disgust overlapped, that she wished she could have gone through that forbidden door with him” (Saints 180). If in “A Rose” the girl had only wanted the mother to understand and accept her life, the narrator in “My Two Mothers” comes to recognise a similar desire for acceptance in her mother—“a woman desperately trying to explain herself and to be understood” (Saints 176). Again, this aspect of mutuality recalls Benjamin’s intersubjective relationship which is founded on “the need for mutual recognition, the necessity of recognizing as well as being recognized by the other [...] This means that the child has a need to see the mother, too, as an independent subject, not simply as the ‘external world’ or an adjunct of his ego” (23).

The ending of both stories links the death of the mother to a final failure of communication. In “A Rose,” “an envelope addressed to her in her mother’s handwriting” only contains “some trinkets, a gold sovereign, and some money” (Fanatic 404). And although the daughter desperately “wanted something, some communiqué,” “there was no such thing.” The mother’s death radically stops all understanding or reconciliation: “A new wall had arisen, stronger and sturdier than before [...] silence filled the room and there was a vaster silence beyond, as if the house itself had died or had been carefully put down to sleep” (Fanatic 404). In “My Two Mothers,” the mother’s death is also symbolised by an “unfinished” last letter (Saints 181). Yet, this ending is not final, as in “A Rose,” for the narrator keeps the conversation open by rereading her mother through memories and letters and by hopefully waiting for “the dream that leads us beyond the ghastly white spittoon and the metal razor, to fields and meadows, up onto the mountain [...] to begin our journey all over again, to live our lives as they should have been lived, happy, trusting and free of shame” (Saints 181). As in “Green Georgette,” the present tense used in this passage is future-directed and emphasizes hope, wishes and dreams over failures and disappointments.

In spite of the superficial similarities, in short, the mother-daughter plot has undergone quite radical changes in the Saints and Sinners stories. The archetypal and mythical dimension of the mother-daughter relation is downplayed in favour of personal interaction and concrete, individual lives. In both stories, moreover, the daughter notes her mother’s hard life in sometimes difficult circumstances, but highlights above all the moments of joy and wonder. Similarly, although the stories display the familiar O’Brien pattern of desire and disappointment, the hopes and dreams finally stand out most clearly. In the process of reading or re-reading the mother, the daughter also comes to understand the mother as a desiring subject, with wishes and dreams similar to but also different from her own. Instead of waiting to be understood herself—as in “A Rose” or “Cords”—it is now the daughter who seeks to understand the mother and, in doing so, comes to understand herself. This is particularly clear in “My Two Mothers,” where the narrator’s act of rereading leads her to the realisation that “what I admired in her most
was her unceasing labour, allowing for no hour of rest, no day of rest. She had set me an example by her resilience and a strange childish gratitude for things” (Saints 179). What the story also, be it more implicitly, suggests is that the writer-narrator owes some of her creativity and writing skills to her mother—even though her literary career has always been a bone of contention between them. This shared creative space between mother and daughter is in fact also hinted at in The Light of Evening, where the letters the writer-protagonist receives from her mother form an important part of the novel. As Ellen McWilliams has suggested, “her mother’s letters from her home place in County Clare retain a powerful hold over her and, most importantly, leave their imprint on her writing” (56).

Since it is well known that Edna O’Brien drew on her own letters from her mother for The Light of Evening, one might be tempted to look at the author’s personal circumstances for an explanation of this recent transformation of the mother-daughter plot. McWilliams argues in this respect that O’Brien’s “more conciliatory version of the mother-daughter relationship and, by extension, the relationship between the Irish woman writer and Ireland […] may be usefully mapped onto O’Brien’s own changing relationship with her home place,” both in terms of her mother and motherland (51). Although the autobiographical input is certainly there, I think it is important not to exaggerate it, especially since O’Brien’s recent memoir, Country Girl, clearly revealed the large and significant differences between the author’s own life and that of her protagonists. It is probably as instructive, therefore, to consider the changing mother-daughter plots of O’Brien’s short stories in the context of international and Irish literary trends.

In her 1989 study, Marianne Hirsch already recognised a development towards a more positive appraisal of the mother in African-American feminist texts, where a recovery of the mother’s story and a matrilineal heritage is seen as a necessary ingredient of the daughter’s development. Somewhat more tentatively, Anne Fogarty detects traces of a similar pattern in Irish novels of the 1990s where “the desire to break loose from traditional familial and psychic impediments” coexists with “the urge to recover the history of the mother” as a “necessary concomitant of the daughter’s quest for fulfilment and self-knowledge” (113). Yet, Fogarty immediately qualifies this, noting that “the mother remains, however, an ominous and disturbing figure even in these fables of female reconciliation. Painful rapprochements and intractable tensions continue to be the fulcrum of Irish fictions that focus on the complex ambiguities of the mother-daughter relationship” (114). We have seen how the daughter’s botched attempts at reconciliation, through uncovering her mother’s—secret—story also informed “A Rose,” with the daughter vainly seeking the mother’s acceptance and approval on the basis of shared sexual passion. As McWilliams has shown, further, The Light of Evening qualifies as a further, more successful fable of female reconciliation, with the mother’s voice “given equal presence to the daughter’s story” (64) and mother and daughter arriving “at a meaningful, if uneasy, understanding of each other by the end of the text” (54). If this novel—unlike earlier stories—manages to represent the mother as a subject of her own story, “Green Georgette” and “My Two Mothers” take this development even further by portraying the mother as a desiring subject within the daughter’s own story, thus presenting the mother-daughter bond as an intersubjective relationship, based on similarity, difference and mutual recognition.

In an Irish context, the importance of this representation of the mother as an embodied subject of desire, enjoying good food, soft clothes and even sexual passion, cannot be
underestimated. In Gender, Ireland, and Cultural Change, Gerardine Meaney has argued that the Irish cultural imagination has long been haunted by the idolisation of the mother Mary as a Virgin and the concomitant “refusal to countenance any representation of the mother’s body as origin of life” (8). In her book, she offers a detailed analysis of “the derealisation of motherhood in the ideology of the southern Irish state,” which created a culture that sought to “exclude the sexual, maternal, nurturing, ever-hungry body” (10). “Green Georgette” and “My Two Mothers” clearly seek to break with that repression, by representing the mother as, indeed, hungry, nurturing, and sensual—if not, or not explicitly, sexual.

Interestingly, similar representations of the mother as a desiring subject have emerged in contemporary short stories of other women writers. Anne Enright’s recent collection Taking Pictures (2008), for instance, contains some stories in which a grown-up daughter is slightly baffled to discover evidence of her mother’s separate existence, of her life “as another subject with a purpose apart from her existence for the child,” as Benjamin has put it (23). In “Honey,” a mother’s dying from cancer confronts the protagonist with her mother’s body—“Both of them listening to her body, the silent chemicals doing their silent work, and the dent on the side of her breast the largest thing in the room” (Taking 80)—and desires: “her mother [...] saying, ‘These are the things I regret: I never slept with a Frenchman. I never slept with that little fucker whatshisname who went on to make all the money. I didn’t enjoy you girls enough when you were young enough not to thwart me. I deeply resent all that dieting. Deeply. Bitterly. What else? Nothing’” (Taking 82). In “Cruise” too, the daughter is brought up short by the realisation of her parents’ mortal body. Later, at her father’s funeral, she is appalled to learn of her mother’s intense friendship with another elderly couple, finding her “collapsed and sobbing, in a strange man’s arms” (Taking 52). The image of the mother which is foregrounded here is the opposite of the self-denying, sacrificial Madonna which has haunted the Irish imagination for much of the twentieth century. Instead what we find here is a focus on the maternal—sexual and mortal—body and on the mother’s identity as a subject in her own right. This awareness also allows the daughter to recognise the commonality between herself and her mother, as when the protagonist of “Honey” realises in an epiphany at the end of the story that “what she had felt as she stepped away from her mother’s grave” was “lightness—it was desire. And it was vast” (Taking 87).

Claire Keegan’s short story collections Antarctica (1999) and Walk the Blue Fields (2007) also contain several mother-daughter plots. Although set in a seemingly timeless rural Ireland in which patriarchal patterns are still firmly in place, the stories mostly give a nuanced portrayal of the relationships between mothers and their adolescent daughters. In general, the stories put less emphasis on the maternal body and desire, with the exception of “The Forrester’s Daughter” which revolves around the mother’s adulterous affair. Instead, the emphasis lies on the relationship between mother and daughter which is characterised, as I argued elsewhere, by mutual solidarity and respect (D’hoker). In “Men and Women,” for instance, the young girl—unlike her brother—comes to recognise her mother’s hurt feelings on the New Year’s Party and tries to step in and “rescue” her (Antarctica 29) and in “The Ginger Rogers Sermon,” daughter and mother parodically enact a gendered ritual every Saturday when they dress up for an evening out. As in O’Brien’s “Green Georgette,” the daughter recognises the mother as a subject with dreams and fears, similar to and different from her own. Yet Keegan goes even further than O’Brien by making this mutual recognition the basis for female empowerment and change within
a patriarchal society. This sense of action and change is in Keegan’s stories also conveyed through a clever use of first-person, present-tense narration, which is future-directed—as in the first part of “Green Georgette”—and allows for the possibility that dreams, hopes and resolutions may be realised, that change is possible, even within conservative rural communities.

24 Following on from her critique of the “matricide,” the silencing of the mother, which is at the heart of Western culture, Luce Irigaray has launched a plea for a symbolisation of the mother-daughter relationship: “we need to say goodbye to maternal omnipotence [...] and establish a woman-to-woman relationship of reciprocity with our mothers, in which they might possibly also feel themselves to be our daughters. In a word, liberate ourselves along with our mothers” (Reader 50). “If mothers could be women,” she continues, “there would be a whole mode of a relationship of desiring speech between daughter and mother” (Reader 52). For an example of such symbolisations of the mother-daughter relationship, she turns in An Ethics of Sexual Difference to the “beautiful images of that natural and spiritual couple, the mother-daughter” which can be found in Greek mythology (Ethics 189). In her response to Irigaray, Amber Jacobs supports this appeal but warns that these mythic images are still “part of the male imaginary’s idealisation of this relation, the reverse of which is denigration” and that they threaten to “reproduce the situation she is trying to rectify—the collapse of mother and daughter into a merged identity that sustains the foreclosure of their structural differentiation” (179). Jacobs suggests instead that new symbolisations of the mother-daughter relation are needed which “represent the differentiation between mother and daughter,” based on a perception of the mother “as a sexed subjected whose relation to filiation and generational transmission is given expression in the symbolic economy” (178, 181).

25 Although Jacobs aims to realise these symbolisations in new psychoanalytic theories, the preceding analysis has made clear, I hope, that they can actually already be found in contemporary women’s literature. Indeed, the recent short stories of O’Brien, Enright and Keegan successfully dramatize mother-daughter relations which circumvent the mythic images of the sacrificial and devouring mother that have so long dominated the Western imagination. Avoiding the traps of idealisation and denigration, they represent the mother as an embodied subject, with her own fears, hopes and desires. The recognition of the mother as a subject in her own right, moreover, also acts as an important catalyst in the realisation of an intersubjective relation between mother and daughter, based on reciprocity, mutual understanding and respect. Returning to O’Brien’s recent mother-daughter stories, it will be clear that they are far from a mere repetition of earlier themes and plots. Like her daughter characters instead, O’Brien engages in a process of extensive re-reading and re-writing, thereby casting both the mother and the mother-daughter plot in an entirely new light. The mothers in these stories, then, are neither the saints nor the sinners referred to in the title, but rather ordinary human beings, “desperately trying [...] to be understood” (176).
BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES


2. For Irigaray, the major cultural taboo is the relationship with the mother rather than, as Freud argued, the murder of the father. The lack of proper representation of this relationship, leads to the continuing hold of primitive phantasies which see the mother as a devouring monster. It is important therefore that the relationship with the mother, and in particular the mother-daughter relationship, is brought out of silence and into representation within the symbolic order. Irigaray elaborates on this especially in two early texts, “Women-Mothers, the Silent Substratum of the Social Order” and “The Bodily Encounter with the Mother” (both included in The Irigaray Reader), as well as in An Ethics of Sexual Difference. For a more detailed discussion of Irigaray’s thinking on the mother-daughter relationship, see Whitford, Jacobs, Ingman.

3. Heather Ingman has noted similarly that in O’Brien’s novels, “mothers are often portrayed as joyless, self-denying victims of male violence” (78).

4. See also The Guardian review of the book which notes, “O’Brien revisits subjects she has covered in her novels: troubles family relations deep in the country in “Old Wounds,” the mutual heartbreak of mothers and daughters in “Two Mothers” (Brownrigg).

5. This recalls the mother’s intense class awareness in “A Demon,” where her attempts to ingratiate herself with the doctor’s wife are elaborated on at length.

6. The bare outline of the mother figure in this story, as of that in “My Two Mothers,” thus corresponds to the typical O’Brien mother, whom Ann Owens Weekes has characterised as follows: “Usually married to an alcoholic, abusive, lazy husband, this recurring figure often spends some time abroad before marrying, a time she later looks back on with longing. Once married, she puts on airs and accents to impress strangers; holds the home together through scrimping and drudgery; fawns on those whose social recognition she desires; distrusts and belittles those whose values differ from her own” (109).
7. With this intersubjective perspective, Benjamin aims to offer a correction to the “distorted view of the mother” in psychoanalysis, and indeed, “in the culture as a whole.” Psychoanalysis, and specifically objects relations theory, she argues, only understand the mother as an object of the infant’s needs, attachment or love, but not “as another subject with a purpose apart from her existence for the child” (23).

ABSTRACTS

Cet article analyse la manière dont Edna O’Brien revisite la relation problématique entre mère et fille dans ses nouvelles “A Green Georgette” et “A My Two Mothers”. Publiés en 2011 dans le recueil Saints and Sinners, ces deux textes présentent un certain nombre de caractéristiques qui rappellent des récits publiés antérieurement, tels “The Rug,” “A Demon” et “A Rose in the Heart of New York”. Toutefois, la représentation de la mère dans “A Green Georgette” et “My Two Mothers” est nettement différente. Contrairement à la mise en scène habituelle de la mère en tant que personnage réprimé et répressif qui fait abnégation de soi-même, l'image maternelle qui s'impose dans “Green Georgette” et “A My Two Mothers” est celle d’un individu cultivant ses désirs, voire d’une personne qui ose revendiquer ses propres droits. Cette conception particulière de la mère se traduit à travers les actes de lecture et de relecture de la part de la fille, et constitue la base sur laquelle s’appuie la relation intersubjective et réciproque entre mère et fille, telle qu’elle est représentée dans ces deux nouvelles. Par le biais d’une comparaison avec des récits d’Anne Enright et de Claire Keegan, l’article montre à quel point la redéfinition de la figure de la mère, telle qu’elle a été effectuée par O’Brien, peut être liée aux développements récents au sein du domaine de la short fiction irlandaise. Il prouve également que les œuvres de ces écrivaines constituent des réponses à l’appel lancé par Luce Irigaray, invitant à une nouvelle apprehension symbolique de la relation mère-fille.

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