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# Rewriting the Irish Short Story: Emma Donoghue's *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits*

Debbie Brouckmans and Elke D'hoker

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- 1 The Irish short story tradition has long been considered a predominantly realist one, with writers from George Moore and James Joyce over Frank O'Connor and Seán O'Faoláin to John McGahern and Claire Keegan offering largely mimetic portrayals of Irish life. As Heather Ingman has convincingly argued in her *A History of the Irish Short Story*, however, this dominant realist mode has often led critics to overlook that other strand in Irish short fiction—the strand of the fantastic, the gothic or the metafictional which emerges in the short fiction of writers like Sheridan LeFanu, James Stephens, Elizabeth Bowen and Samuel Beckett and foregrounds themes of “fragmentation or dissolution” (12). Ingman traces the development of this fantastic strand up to the present, with the short fiction of contemporary women writers which seeks to “explor[e] the changing nature of femininity and instability of female identity in a playful, postmodernist style” (250). The early short story collections of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Anne Enright and Emma Donoghue are referred to as cases in point.
- 2 Even though the more recent work of these writers, in such collections as *The Shelter of Neighbours* (2012), *Taking Pictures* (2008), and *Touchy Subjects* (2006), respectively, seems to largely abandon postmodern experiment and return towards a more realist mode of writing (D'hoker, “Distorting,” 33-50), these first experimental collections should certainly not be forgotten, as they form important and innovative contributions to the development of the Irish short story. Compared to the quite substantive critical engagement with the postmodern short fiction of Anne Enright and Éilís Ní Dhuibhne,<sup>1</sup> Emma Donoghue's story collections have received but little attention from critics. Her collection of postmodern fairy tales, *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* (1997) has been treated as a work for adolescents (Martin 4-25), and her recovering of women's history in *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits* (2002) is often considered as but a supplement to the larger rewriting projects of her historical novels.<sup>2</sup>

- 3 As this essay hopes to show, however, *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits* certainly deserves a more detailed and comprehensive critical scrutiny, as it is an important work in many ways. It deserves attention, first of all, as an instance of the strand of fantasy and fragmentation in the Irish short fiction and, in particular, as part of the postmodern, experimental mode of writing that characterized the Irish short story in the 1990s and early 2000s. Secondly, it needs to be scrutinized in the context of the larger feminist project of recovering women's history through the practices of rewriting. Finally, *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits* can also usefully be read from the perspective of the short story cycle as it is a tightly-structured collection which displays significant similarities, cross-references and connections between the different stories. In what follows, therefore, Donoghue's collection will be considered within these different critical and generic frameworks in order to highlight the specific contribution it makes to both to the tradition of the Irish short story and to the feminist project of recovering forgotten female voices so as to question the gender and sexual politics of a patriarchal society.
- 4 "*The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits* is a book of fictions, but they are also true," announces Donoghue in the "Foreword" to this collection, and she continues, "Over the last ten years, I have often stumbled over a scrap of history so fascinating that I had to stop whatever I was doing and write a story about it" (1). The main motivation guiding this project of recovery and re-imagining, is revealed as curiosity—asking "What really happened?" but also "What if?" Its main method is described as a combination of historical facts and imaginative creation: "I have used memory and invention together, like two hands engaged in the same muddy work of digging up the past" (1). With this foreword, in short, Donoghue explicitly positions her story collection within the postmodern aesthetics of metafictional rewriting, which she also uses in her historical novels. This postmodern project has perhaps most famously been described by Linda Hutcheon as "historiographic metafiction," which she applies to "novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (*Poetics* 5). Like the novels discussed by Hutcheon, indeed, Donoghue's stories often take as starting point half-forgotten anecdotes or submerged historical facts to offer a different, skewed perspective on the dominant historical narrative. The "scrap[s] of history" she refers to in the foreword (1), are anecdotes, footnotes, minor official records, and even a ballad or a painting. Most stories, in fact, seek to imagine the private life, thoughts and feelings of the historical characters referred to in these historical or pseudo-historical documents. Some are rather well-known figures, whose main achievements have been recorded in history, such as the Blind Poetess of Donegal, Frances Brown(e), Mary Wollstonecraft and Dame Alice Kyteler; others are only mentioned as a name, or have remained anonymous, like Mr Knox's niece in "Acts of Union" or the patient in "Cured." Depending on the availability of historical facts, the stories seek either to plumb the private struggles hidden behind well-known public figures and events or to imaginatively reconstruct the lives of ordinary people forgotten in the folds of history. In all seventeen stories, however, the imaginative reality takes precedence before the historical facts as each story is followed by a brief "Note," in smaller font, which mentions the facts that are known and lists historical sources.
- 5 This hierarchical inversion of fiction and fact also points to the metafictional dimension of Donoghue's collection, as it seeks to challenge our belief in history as "objective," as a sequence of "true" facts. One of the main aims of historiographic metafiction, Linda Hutcheon has argued, is indeed to "open [the past] up to the present, to prevent it from

being conclusive and teleological" (*Poetics* 110).<sup>3</sup> Historiographic metafiction thus plays "upon the truth and lies of the historical record. [...] [C]ertain known facts are deliberately falsified in order to foreground the possible mnemonic failures of recorded history and the constant potential for both deliberate and inadvertent error" ("Historiographic" 838).

- 6 The hazy border between truth and lies, fiction and fact is often foregrounded in the stories as well. The significantly placed first story, "The Last Rabbit," centrally revolves around a lie. "And if who can tell what's true and what's not in these times, Mary, why then mayn't this rabbit story be as true as anything else?" (2), Mary's sister-in-law asks when they decide to initiate the scam of a woman giving birth to rabbits. In retrospect, as she is telling her own story, Mary says that, in the end, she supposed her lies had infected her and that her "counterfeit pains had become true" (12). The title of the collection in fact already announces the ambivalence of truth and fiction: while a woman who claimed to have given birth to rabbits seems indeed to have existed, the very phrase "the woman who" alerts us to the pattern of storytelling, while conjuring up rabbits is of course a well-known magician's trick. Interestingly, the title of the collection foregrounds yet another important theme of the book, which Donoghue oddly keeps silent about in the foreword, namely that the imaginative recovery projects of the book all revolve around women. In all of the "forgotten puzzles and peculiar incidents" which Donoghue aims to uncover and remember in her stories, women are indeed the central protagonists. In this way, Donoghue's questioning of history and truth in her collection acquires a clear feminist dimension. *The Woman Who Gave Birth To Rabbits* is then not just a sceptical, postmodern investigation into the impossibility of truth or necessarily subjective and incomplete nature of historical narrative, but also an inquiry into the ideologies that motivate historical narratives, the interests and values that lie behind so-called historical facts. As Linden Peach has put it:

Underpinning the engagement with different histories in her work are questions about the writing of history itself. In whose interests and from what standpoint is it conceived? Who is excluded and who is privileged as a result of the particular narrative perspective? How incomplete are particular histories and who is it that benefits and who is it that is disadvantaged by this incompleteness? (31)

- 7 In *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits*, these "excluded" and "disadvantaged" are, primarily, women. The fact that Donoghue, in her stories, imaginatively reconstructs the lives of these forgotten or marginalized historical women fits in a larger feminist project of recovery and empowerment. In some stories, the women are literally empowered by being given a voice with which to tell their version of the facts, while in other stories their perspective is revealed through focalisation. The importance of having a voice is referred to by Mary in "The Fox on the Line," when she ponders in her diary: "Keeping a diary is a monstrous waste of time. But I cannot seem to help it. Without words, we move through life as mute as animals" (29).
- 8 As Liedeke Plate and Gayle Greene have argued, this self-conscious attempt to give voice to those women who had been marginalized, misrepresented or forgotten in history or in literature, is one of the central trends in late twentieth-century feminist fiction. Greene emphasises in particular the metafictional dimension of this practice of rewriting and argues that "feminist metafiction may have more radical implications than male post-modernist texts, in having more urgency and edge, more relevance to lived experience: for when women write of being trapped in an alien tradition, they write from a sense of living in a culture not their own" (19). Plate claims similarly that through the aesthetics

of rewriting, women writers seek “to propel them [the silent and the silences] into the space of representation that is also the place of remembrance. Seeking to “know the past” differently, women’s rewriting “writes back to silence in an effort to generate usable pasts, answering it with stories of its own” (97).

- 9 The books discussed in this respect by critics like Hutcheon, Greene and Plate, however, are principally novels.<sup>4</sup> In *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits*, to the contrary, Donoghue uses these techniques of feminist rewriting and historiographic metafiction in a sequence of seventeen short stories. It is important, therefore, to take a moment to consider the particular effect of this choice of genre on the meaning of the book in general and Donoghue’s feminist project in particular. What this collection of short stories foregrounds, first of all, is diversity and variety. Unlike novels which tend to zoom in on one historical frame and one or at most a few female protagonists, the women staged by Donoghue differ considerably in terms of age, class and nationality. Some are upper-class ladies, like Mary Stuart O’Donnell Countess Tyrconnell in “Figures of Speech,” Elizabeth Pennington in “How a Lady Dies” and the Cottage Ladies in “Salvage”; others are middle-class, like Frances and Mary in “The Fox on the Line” and Euphemia in “Come, Gentle Night.” Women like Mary Toft in “The Last Rabbit,” Kitty in “A Short Story” and Margery Starre in “The Necessity of Burning” belong to the lower classes or are entirely outcasts and outsiders. Some of the characters are only girls, like Frances in “Night Vision” and Dido in the story of that title, while others are middle-aged or elderly. Still other characters are followed over an entire lifetime, such as Margaret Drummond in “Account” and Kitty in “A Short Story.” The women also come from different parts of the British Isles—from London over Nithsdale, Scotland and Hengwrt, Wales, to Dublin—and live in widely divergent time periods, ranging from the fourteenth century of “The Necessity of Burning” to the twentieth century of “Looking for Petronilla.” Moreover, while some women clearly are victims of patriarchal oppression or violence, others employ violence themselves or oppress and exploit those who stand beneath them. The most glaring example, perhaps, is the female prophet Friend Mother, who has founded a personal cult and makes her children fast until disease and death while she remains healthy by secretly eating bacon. What is more, Donoghue adds to this sense of diversity by employing different styles and narrative forms for the stories as well. Most of the stories, for instance, have third-person narration. Both female and male narrators appear, but the majority of these stories are focalized through a woman. The many I-narrators in the book are all female and they include Mary Toft (“The Last Rabbit”) and Dame Alice (“Looking for Petronilla”), as well as Mary Lloyd (“The Fox on the Line”), Frances Brown(e) (“Night Vision”) and Dido Bell (“Dido”). Since the women are all explicitly staged as narrators, Donoghue carefully adapts their different voices to their nationality, class and age. This stylistic and narratological variety thus further adds to the highly diversified picture Donoghue paints of women’s lives in Britain and Ireland in the last seven hundred years.
- 10 Yet, *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits* is not just a short story collection. As the foreword and aesthetic structure of the book already indicate, this diversity and variety is counteracted by an aesthetic unity as well as by a common aim and method: the imaginative recovery of women’s lives and histories, neglected or distorted in the official history of the British Isles. As we hope to show, moreover, this unity is not confined to foreword and structure alone but is continually strengthened by the cross-references, similarities, and symbols that tie the different stories together. For this reason, *The*

*Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits* can be read as a short story cycle, a hybrid genre mid-way between the loose collection of short stories and the more highly unified form of the novel. Originally defined by Forrest L. Ingram as “a book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader’s successive experience of various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts” (19),<sup>5</sup> the genre has been further analysed and described by critics such as Susan Garland Mann, James Nagel, and Robert M. Luscher. Although there is an ongoing discussion about the appropriate terminology and the precise limits of the genre,<sup>6</sup> critics agree that the main characteristic of the short story cycle consists of the “simultaneous self-sufficiency and interdependence” (Mann 15) of its component parts and that this simultaneity often gives rise to a tension between diversity and unity, between “the one and the many,” as Ingram famously put it (19). Luscher also stresses the active participation of the reader in negotiating this tension and recovering the cycle’s meaning. The reader, he argues, is invited to construct a “network of associations that binds the stories together and lends them cumulative thematic impact” (148). In what follows, we will trace this network of associations in *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits* so as to uncover their cumulative thematic impact in the book as a whole.

- 11 In spite of the marked differences between the women characters in *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits*, there is one important thing they have in common: they are all depicted as firmly fixed within a patriarchal structure.<sup>7</sup> Even if some women occupy positions of power with regard to their servants, children, or even—as in “Revelations”—an entire community, they are all shown to labour under the gender norms and gendered hierarchies of a patriarchal society. Margaret King’s forbidding mother in “Words for Things,” for instance, embodies patriarchal rule in enforcing her daughter to obey gendered expectations for young ladies and she dismisses the governess, Mary Wollstonecraft, for leading her daughter away from her duties. Most of the female characters are, however, more clearly depicted as victims of patriarchal oppression. Mary Toft (“The Last Rabbit”), Mr Knox’s niece (“Acts of Union”) and Kitty (“A Short Story”) are all exploited by men in various money-making schemes. Miss F. (“Cured”) is tricked into undergoing a cliterodectomy by a surgeon she admires and trusts. Frances and Mary (“The Fox on the Line”) are thwarted by the “old boys” network of the legal and political system in their struggle for animal rights. Similarly, the blind girl Frances (“Night Vision”) has to stand up against the local authorities to receive the education she desires. Another interesting example is “Account,” which exposes the inferior position of women in the mediaeval feudal system through a bulleted account of the life of King James IV of Scotland and of the many mistresses he took on, dismissed and—allegedly—killed.
- 12 If the female characters of *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits* share a position of subordination in the society they live in, the male characters are mostly depicted as occupying positions of power and authority. Although some characters, such as the father of Frances in “Night Vision” or Margery’s husband in “The Necessity of Burning,” embody this position with tact and empathy, others can be seen to take advantage of it and to abuse their power in various ways. Especially men of specific authority in a patriarchal society, such as priests, lawyers, doctors and scientists, are depicted in a negative way throughout the book. They are shown to use their authority to mislead women and to misuse language in order to exercise power over them. For instance, the priest in “The Necessity of Burning,” who did not arrive in time to christen a dying baby because he was

drunk, refuses to bury it in holy ground, because its mother, trying to christen the boy herself, mixed up the order of the words:

The priest was shaking his head. "Ah, woman," he said crossly. [...] Margery was almost shrieking. "What? Aren't those the right words?" "Aye", the priest said, pursing his lips, "but in the wrong order. The Father goes before the Son, as any ignoramus knows. It's the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost." She stared at him. "What does that mean?" "It means that this child's soul is lost to hellfire through your carelessness, woman, that's what it means!" (196)

- 13 In most stories, in fact, the authority and power these men enjoy is not the power of physical strength, but the power of knowledge and language. In "Cured," for instance, the famous Victorian surgeon Isaac Baker Brown uses technical terms and his position of authority to trick his patient, Miss F. who suffers from back ache, into admitting to symptoms of hysteria, a medical condition he proposes to cure by means of a cliterodectomy. The story, focalized through the hapless patient, is interrupted by the doctor's notes on the case, so as to illustrate again the manipulations and distortions that lie behind ostensibly objective scientific descriptions. As Peach indicates, the woman's lack of command of medical language in fact equals a lack of control over her body (38). The surgeon examines her in "a part she has no name for, or not one that could be said aloud" (111). When she threatens to tell her brother what the doctor has done to her, he asserts his power again: "'I'm afraid he would not understand which *part* you mean. He is not a man of much education.' A pause. 'How would you describe the *part* to him, Miss F.?' Another moment went by. 'Would you point perhaps?'" (121-2).
- 14 "Cured" thus brings together the two lines of subjection and control which the stories bear witness to: the physical subjection or containment of female bodies, by doctors and scientists in particular, and the power of words, learning and official discourse to control or manipulate women. Women are reduced to mere bodies in several stories, whether in a medical context as in "Cured," in the frame of a freak show as in "The Last Rabbit" and "A Short Story," or simply as part of a marriage deal, as in "Acts of Union." Moreover, many of the female characters have a physical defect which seems to symbolize their reduced position; they are blind, crippled, pregnant, too small, or suffer from severe pain. In "The Last Rabbit," the first-person narrator has been so thoroughly examined by medical men that she remarks wryly, "for a month I had been nothing but a body" (12). The fate of women is in some stories also linked to that of animals. The rabbits referred to in the title crop up in other stories as well and in "The Fox on the Line" the narrator links the practice of vivisection to the oppression of women's bodies:
- Nowadays I see vivisections everywhere. In the heels that deform women's feet, for instance; in the corsets that grip our lungs. "If we dress like slaves," Fà says, "no wonder men enslave us." I have known two women who died of having their ovaries removed, quite unnecessarily. I have heard whispers of another fashionable operation, where a part is cut away that is not diseased at all. The surgeons do it simply to kill passion. Simply to make women quieter. Simply because they can. (34)
- 15 Recalling both the cliterodectomy of "Cured" and the vivisectionist practice of "The Fox on the line," the seven-inch long girl in "A Short Story" is, quite literally, dissected after her death by "a butcher in the service of science" (167) and her skeleton is displayed. There is, however, a symbolical victory in this: "She was a fossil, now; she had her niche in history. [...] She would stand grinning at her baffled visitors until all those who'd ever known her were dust" (169). This girl, who could only speak a few words, will outlive the men who took advantage of her in order to make money and leave her mark while they are long forgotten.

- 16 In similar way, in fact, most of the female characters in *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits* are granted moments of rebellion or revenge. The protagonist in “The Last Rabbit” ultimately revolts against her being reduced to a mere body and decides to tell her story.<sup>8</sup> In “Cured,” the female protagonist successfully plays the role of the submissive patient in order to achieve her release; in “Come, Gentle Night,” Effie Ruskin reacts against her husband’s disembodying of her into an idealised “queen” by divorcing him on the grounds of “non-consummation” (94). In “The Necessity of Burning,” to give a final example, Margery takes revenge on the priest who refused her new-born son a Christian burial by throwing the Church books into the fire.
- 17 In this story, moreover, the woman’s rebelling against the clergy’s and clerks’ power of words becomes a metafictional *mise en abyme* of Donoghue’s own feminist rewriting in *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits*. “What good ever came out of a book,” Margery wonders:
- She doesn’t need to read them to know what’s in them; she’s heard enough. Tales of lickerous widows who force men to lie with them; tales of clever young men who trick girls into lying with them; whole books full of wicked wives, like Eve who let the snake into Paradise. No wonder, Margery reckons, seeing as it’s men who write the books. (187)
- 18 The story ends with Margery asserting agency and power, not just through the act of book-burning, but also by claiming—somewhat ironically—a place in the history books: “the churchmen will tremble when they hear of Margery Starre—read of her, even, maybe. In the turning of a page, in the lifting of a pen, they will pause to think how fast paper burns” (198-9). Here the text, about a woman burning books, who will be mentioned in texts read by those whose texts she destroyed, becomes metafictional to the second degree. Although the power of words and books were used against her, Margery and her rebellion against patriarchal society are in fact remembered by way of a written record.
- 19 In giving these neglected or forgotten female lives a space—and often a voice—within the covers of her own book, Donoghue also aims to set right the injustices done to them, whether in their own times or in their subsequent marginalisation in authoritative histories. What is important, however, is that Donoghue always seeks to highlight elements of agency or rebellion within the women’s lives themselves. As a result, they are not staged as mere victims of patriarchy which have to be rescued by the more enlightened feminists of today. By this repeated staging of women who are not *quite* or not *just* victims, Donoghue also implicitly addresses some of the problems which feminist historiographic metafiction often faces: in retelling history from the perspective of the oppressed outsider, these works run the risk of repeating rather than reversing this position of marginalisation. Donoghue’s emphasis on women’s agency within a structure of confinement and oppression thus offers a correction to this tradition of victimization. As we have seen, some of her characters use and abuse power themselves, while even those who are victimised find ways of resisting patriarchal structures and oppression.
- 20 That fact that Donoghue’s female characters are not “the weeping piteous victims who flock across the pages of history” (204) is even more emphatically demonstrated in the final story of the collection, “Looking for Petronilla,” which nicely ties together the different thematic, symbolic and metafictional strands of the short story cycle. Also in terms of space and time, the story functions as a true closing story. It is narrated by Dame Alice who has restlessly travelled the world, haunted by guilt for having allowed her faithful maid Petronilla to be burnt as a witch while she herself managed to escape from

her executioners. As a result, she cannot die and is now revisiting Kilkenny, the scene of the crime, after seven hundred years—which is, not coincidentally, also the time-span of the book. In Kilkenny, she tries to imaginatively recover surviving evidence of her life, and in particular the life of her maid, in a bid to redress her former neglect. Her quest thus mimics that of Donoghue who has similarly “travelled” the British Isles and revisited seven centuries of British history for evidence of women’s hidden, private lives.

- 21 The story again comments on the distortions and omissions of our histories. Alice’s own life has become the stuff of tourist attractions—“History always becomes a cartoon, where it survives at all” (201)—and is remembered chiefly because of the mythic demonization of a woman’s crime: “When a man kills a wife, he is a tortured rebel, *criminel de passion*, dusky Othello or bluff King Hal. When a woman kills her husband, she is never allowed to forget it” (201). She has become a “long-nailed monster, a Kilkenny Clytemnestra” (201). What is forgotten in the process, as *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits* as a whole also points out, are the ordinary lives of women who are neither victim nor monster—such as Petronilla, her maid, who is interesting in her “extraordinary ordinariness” (202). Yet, evidence of this ordinary life is hard to find: “Petronilla is not here. There is nothing left. I do not know what I was hoping for, exactly: some sign of presence, some message scratched for me on the prison wall, some whisper from her walking ghost” (208). Even though Alice fails to find some facts or truths about her maid, she keeps searching and hoping: “My one faith is that I will find some trace of Petronilla. My one hope is that she will teach me how to die. My one love now, the only one whose face I can remember. There, around some corner, she burns, she burns” (212). In this closing story, in other words, the feminist aesthetics of rewriting history by recovering forgotten lives is both enacted and questioned for its truth and efficacy. Once again, the representation of women as victims of men, society and history is explicitly engaged with. In an obviously feminist revisionary history book, Dame Alice discovers that she is portrayed as a “victim of a combination of the worst excesses of fourteenth-century Christo-patriarchy. [...] As in so many other ‘witch trials,’ powerful men (both church and lay) projected their own unconscious fantasies of sexual/satanic perversion onto the blank canvas of a woman’s life” (206). Alice laughs at this, knowing, although there is some truth in it, she is certainly not innocent: “*blank canvas, my eye*” (206).
- 22 In all, by preferring the form of the short story cycle over that of the novel for her feminist recovery project, Donoghue is able to, on the one hand, paint a broad canvas and present a large variety of female characters and, on the other hand, to draw attention to the things these characters—and beyond them, all women in patriarchal societies—have in common. What stands out in this respect is that, in spite of their structurally submissive and secondary position in society, which renders them vulnerable to abuse by men of authority, they are nevertheless not without agency, nor simply innocent. By emphasising in particular the gestures of rebellion or resistance, however small, on the part of her female characters, Donoghue refuses them the status of “weeping piteous victims” which both official histories and, ironically, feminist revisionary histories have often bestowed on them. The women Donoghue manages to rescue from oblivion or to resurrect from the “facts” that remain, are above all shown to be ordinary human beings, with their own dreams, hopes and disappointments, who always exceed the stereotypical images of “monster,” “cartoon” or “blank canvas” with which history and culture have too often sought to contain them.

- 23 Ordinary women's rebellion against confining stereotypes is also the topic of both Anne Enright's and Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's postmodern fictions. Like Donoghue, both writers focus on the position and identity of women in patriarchal society, but they do so in radically different, though interestingly complementary, ways. While Donoghue's metafictional stories draw on historical facts to bring to light women's ordinary lives in previous periods, Ní Dhuibhne is, throughout her early short stories, more interested in what folk tales tell us about women's place in patriarchal society. As Caitriona Moloney has argued, in "Midwife to the Fairies," Ní Dhuibhne juxtaposes an ancient folk tale and a contemporary story to "emphasize the longevity of practices that silence women in literature and history" (2). In *The Inland Ice and Other Stories*, to give another example, Ní Dhuibhne uses the techniques of feminist metafiction to recover and revision the often passive and submissive roles of women in traditional fairy and folk tales. This collection, which could also be called a short story cycle, is held together by the fragmented telling of "The Search for the Lost Husband," a feminist retelling of an old Irish folk tale.<sup>9</sup> In the other stories, moreover, she reveals the continuing hold of fairy tale notions about women, love and marriage on contemporary women's lives today. Very much like Donoghue, moreover, Ní Dhuibhne is keen to stress the grey zone between truth and lies, between fact and fiction, suggesting that the power of stories and storytelling easily overrides that opposition. Like some of the characters in Donoghue's stories, the heroine of "The Search for the Lost Husband" simply claims the right to tell her own story: "That is my story. And if there is a lie in it, it was not I who made it up. All I got for my story was butter boots and paper hats. And a white dog came and ate the boots and tore the hats. But what matters? What matters but the good of the story?" (*Inland Ice* 262)
- 24 For Anne Enright in *The Portable Virgin*, on the other hand, it is not so much folk tales or histories that performatively represent women's secondary place in a patriarchal society. In her highly experimental early stories, she focuses rather on the continuing hold of certain words and images on gender expectations in contemporary society. The title story of the collection for instance zooms in on the iconic image of the Virgin to highlight the chaste and submissive role that is still expected of women. In other stories female characters strain to find words for their bodies and desires. In the only story to actually use the technique of feminist rewriting, "Felix,"<sup>10</sup> Enright in fact uses the frame of Nabokov's *Lolita* to tell the story of a middle-aged woman's passionate affair with a young boy. The female narrator can be seen to struggle against ingrained Catholic taboos to find words to express her desire. "Descriptions of the sexual act always pain me," she admits and she notes self-consciously, "I must stop. 'Ghost,' 'flesh,' 'fine, blunt cheekbones,' these words are all strangers to me" (297, 300). Hence, she tries to follow "Poe, and Proust, [...] Keats and Thomas Mann" as "the secret must be in the style" (297-298).
- 25 In short, with Donoghue's recovery of women's histories, Ní Dhuibhne's rewriting of folk tales and Enright's reclaiming of the words, symbols and images of feminine identity, all three writers can be seen to contribute to a feminist writing-back in contemporary Irish fiction. The metafictional dimension and/or formal experiment of their fiction suggest once again the search for new forms that accompanies the attempt to tell new stories or to highlight alternative feminine identities. That the more recent short fiction of these writers bears witness to a partial return to realism and to an opening up to other, less explicitly feminist, concerns should not lead us to forget that it is precisely their earlier postmodern and feminist practice of rewriting that has made this new phase possible.

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## NOTES

1. For critical approaches, see Tallone 165-68; D'hoker, "Postmodern" 129-39; Shumaker 107-22; Moloney 1-15.

2. Emma Donoghue, *Slammerkin* (2000); *Life Mask* (2004); *The Sealed Letter* (2008). Two recent articles investigate Donoghue's feminist project of rewriting history in her novels: Maria Mulvany highlights *Slammerkin*'s self-conscious attempt to redress "the spectralization of women in history" (158) and Claire O'Callaghan reveals how Donoghue tackles contemporary postfeminist problems through the neo-Victorianism of *The Sealed Letter*. Both articles briefly refer to *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits* as part of a similar "project of rewriting feminist histories" (Mulvany 158; O'Callaghan 68).

3. As Judy Lochead points out, postmodernism sees teleological notions of history as having negative implications for "those groups whose 'stories' have been erased" (6).

4. Generally, as Hutcheon indicates, the privileged genre for historiographic metafiction is the novel (*Poetics* 5). Greene, for example, focuses on novels by Doris Lessing, Margaret Drabble, Margaret Atwood and Margaret Laurence. Plate, although she also discusses short stories by, for instance, Angela Carter, centres her discussion around novels by J.M. Coetzee, Maryse Condé and Michèle Roberts.

5. Well-known examples of short story cycles are, for instance, Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914), Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989).

6. Critics have used different terms to designate the works which belong to this genre, for example "short story sequence" (Luscher), "composite novel" (Dunn & Morris), "short story

composite" (Lundén), etc. Although the term short story cycle has been criticized for suggesting an idea of circularity that cannot be found in all short story cycles, we have opted to use this term, because it is the most widespread.

7. Interestingly, they are often given identical or similar names (e.g. Frances, Euphemia, Mary, Margaret or Margery) and last names (e.g. Bell and Gray). Mann speaks of a "composite protagonist" (10) when the protagonists of the different stories bear a strong resemblance to one another. So, in this sense, the book could be seen as unified by the presence of a composite protagonist.

8. Interestingly, the titles of the book and of the story about Mary Toft are not identical. The title of the first story, "The Last Rabbit," refers to Mary's wish to bring about "one last rabbit" (11) when she is being watched by Sir Richard. *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits*, on the other hand—although named for Mary Toft—covers all of the stories. Like the book, this title shows women to be both victims and rebels. It can be seen as objectifying women ("The Woman"), but also as assigning agency to them ("Who Gave Birth").

9. "The Search for the Lost Husband" is Ní Dhuibhne's adaptation of "The Story of the Little White Goat," female storyteller Máire Ruiséal's version of the international "Beauty-and-the-Beast" folktale (D'hoker, "Postmodern" 130).

10. "Felix" is one of Enright's earliest stories. Together with "Seascape," it was first published in the tenth book of Faber's *First Fictions* (1989). Both stories can be found in her collected stories, *Yesterday's Weather* (2008), which also contains all the stories from *Taking Pictures* and eleven of the seventeen stories from *The Portable Virgin*.

## ABSTRACTS

Cet essai propose une analyse de *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits* (2002) d'Emma Donoghue, qu'il considère comme un exemple de la fiction courte irlandaise métafictionnelle, expérimentale et fantastique. Dans la première partie, ce recueil est situé dans le contexte plus large de l'esthétique féminine de ré-écriture et de métafiction, en vue d'examiner en détail son engagement concernant les rôles et les identités des femmes dans les structures et histoires patriarcales. Dans un deuxième temps, l'article montre que la structure générique spécifique du recueil change le message féministe de Donoghue d'une façon particulière: tandis que les histoires se font remarquer individuellement par leur diversité en termes de style, de personnages ou de lieux, beaucoup de références et de répétitions accentuent une position féminine similaire de soumission et d'isolement dans une société patriarcale. Néanmoins, Donoghue veille à toujours souligner des éléments de force pour lutter contre l'image stéréotypée des femmes en tant que simples victimes du patriarcat. La dernière partie de l'article cherche à comparer la ré-écriture féministe de Donoghue avec l'esthétique postmoderne des nouvelles d'Anne Enright et d'Éilís Ní Dhuibhne.

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