CHAPTER 2

Revisiting Fairy-Tale Land through a Gender Lens in Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch*

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Abstract

By the end of the twentieth century, feminist and postmodern criticism had bolstered a literary outburst that presented a challenge to the fairy-tale tradition. A wave of fictional re-writings emerged to address an adult audience with challenging plots and innovative ideas. In 1997, acclaimed Irish writer Emma Donoghue published her first story collection *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins*, a re-writing of thirteen classic tales from Andersen, Perrault and the Brothers Grimm. Its singularity did not go unnoticed and the book was shortlisted for a James Tiptree Award and named an ALA Popular Paperback for Young Adults. Donoghue's stories offer alternative possibilities of female emancipation that reach beyond the boundaries of traditional folk plots. Her female characters subvert the canon, bringing to the fore issues hitherto alien to the fairy-tale universe. Accordingly, literary innovations both transcend content and affect form. Narrated in the first person, the stories are interlinked through the use of a recurring ploy that introduces each new tale. This device serves to unify the selected stories and suggests both a collective plot of oppression inherent in the folk tale pattern, and an uncharted tradition of female rebellion, transformation, and success.

Keywords gender, intersectionality, fairy tale, Emma Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*

1   Engendering the Fairy-Tale Tradition

Prolific writer Emma Donoghue (1969) was born and raised in Ireland. She graduated in English literature and French at University College Dublin, before moving to England where she earned a PhD in English literature, and finally settling in Canada in 1998 where she

established her family home. These changes affected not only her writing but also her place in the English-speaking literary canon. At the beginning of her career, she was considered an Irish author (Bourke et al.; D'hoker; Moloney and Thompson). Later on she was labelled a Canadian writer (Young), but more recently, literary criticism tends to consider her a transnational writer (Ue) and a queer trans-Canadian author (García Zarranz). Furthermore, Emma Donoghue is a declared feminist and a lesbian, as well as an award-winning writer who has experimented with almost every genre: novels, short fiction, drama, screenplays and historical fiction. So far, ten novels, with an eleventh to be published in September 2019, have established her fame worldwide, especially titles such as *Hood* (1995), *Landing* (1997), *Slammerkin* (2000), *The Sealed Letter* (2008) and *Room* (2010). She has also gained fame and recognition for her five short story collections.

C2.P2   In 1997, inspired by feminism and the literary revisionist movement of the late twentieth century, Emma Donoghue published her third book of fiction and first story collection, *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins,* joining the ranks of renowned feminist writers who before her had succeeded in subverting the traditional patriarchal patterns of fairy tales.[1] According to Zipes, these folk stories have since been transformed into new fictional texts with the aim to 'counter as well as collide with our complex social realities'

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[1] Emma Donoghue has confessed her admiration for feminist writers re-writing myth and fairy tales such as Angela Carter, Anne Sexton, Olga Broumas and Jeannete Winterson, among others. In fact, the thirteenth story included in this volume, 'The Tale of the Kiss', was inspired by folk motifs about oracles and magic helpers discussed in Marina Warner's *From the Beast to the Blonde*, as the author states in her web page. For a more detailed account of Donoghue's influences and interests, see the volume of interviews authored by Moloney and Thompson.

(*The Irresistible* 136). A common characteristic of that 'fairy-tale renaissance', Joosen explains (*Critical and Creative* 4), was their challenge to tradition both in form and content in order to 'invite readers to reconsider the traditional texts' (16). In *Kissing the Witch*, Emma Donoghue compiles re-writings of twelve classic stories from Hans Christian Andersen, Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont, Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm, alongside a newly invented tale, all under new titles that work both as a nod to and a deviation from the original tales.[2] In this volume, which received immediate positive criticism and acclaim, Donoghue skillfully manipulates the original pattern of each story to focus attention on her female protagonists' hazardous quest for identity.[3] Following the trend of her first two works,

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[2] 'The Tale of the Shoe' is based on the Grimms' folk tale of Cinderella; 'The Tale of the Bird' is based on Hans Christian Andersen's 'Thumbelina'; 'The Tale of the Rose' is based on Madame le Prince de Beaumont's 'Beauty and the Beast'; 'The Tale of the Apple' is based on the Grimms' folk tale Snow White; 'The Tale of the Handkerchief' is based on the Grimms' 'Goose Girl'; 'The Tale of the Hair' is based on the Grimms' 'Rapunzel'; 'The Tale of the Brother' is based on Andersen's 'Snow Queen'; 'The Tale of the Spinster' is based on the Grimms' 'Rumpelstilskin' and similar stories of magical helpers; 'The Tale of the Cottage' is based on the Grimms' 'Hansel and Gretel'; 'The Tale of the Skin' is based on the Grimms' 'Donkeyskin'; 'The Tale of the Needle' is based on Perrault's 'Sleeping Beauty'; 'The Tale of the Voice' is based on Andersen's 'Little Mermaid'; and, finally, 'The Tale of the Kiss' is an original creation of Emma Donoghue's.

[3] *Kissing the Witch* was originally written for adults and published in the US for Young Adults. Its singularity did not go unnoticed: the book was shortlisted for a James Tiptree Award and named an ALA Popular Paperback for Young Adults. An

Stir Fry (1994) and *Hood* (1995), *Kissing the Witch* challenges normative heterosexual desire (Dutheil de la Rochere; Nolte-Odhiambo; Orme) and explores the potentialities of female bonding (Martin; Palko) for female emancipation, whilst maintaining dialogue with the fairy-tale genre. As Dutheil de la Rochère and Coppola have noted, the author plays with the reader's familiarity with the genre, inserting intertextual references that serve to highlight both resemblances and deviations. In this way, Donoghue uses the fairy tale scheme as a blank page where contemporary issues can be rewritten, Roberts and MacCallum-Setward conclude.

2 Female Voices for Female Stories

Driven by second and third-wave feminist foundations and the postmodernist interest in rewriting, Emma Donoghue challenges the boundaries of female emancipation in the traditional fairy-tale plot, subverting them through the many processes and situations that her protagonists undergo to explore their agency. Formal structure is altered for this ultimate purpose, and so the volume displays a set of literary strategies among which retrospective retelling stands out.[4] In *Kissing the Witch*, each tale is linked to the next by an invisible thread of memory and shared hardship. Donoghue escorts the reader from the protagonist's story to that of the minor character's who, in turn, becomes the heroine of the following tale. In the interim between one story and the next, the orality of the short story tradition becomes prominent through a recurrent dialogic formula in which the protagonist asks 'Who were you

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adaptation of five of Donoghue's stories became a full-length play and it was world premiered by San Francisco's Magic Theatre in 2000.

[4] The originality of this device, one of the many metatextual elements detectable in her collection, has attracted scholarly attention. For a more thorough analysis, see the works of Harries and Joosen, respectively.

before …?' and the second character invariably replies 'Will I tell you my own story? It is a tale of a …'. This way, each new story is told at the encounter of two female subjects, both eager to listen and to speak their own truth. With this ritual Donoghue unfolds a retrospective 'lineage of female storytellers', in Joosen's words ("Reclaiming the Lost Code", 172), and creates a chain of stories 'crafting a subtle genealogy of women' (Palko 919). The result is an original 'intertextual dialogue' (Dutheil de la Rochére 16) where fairy tale and storytelling merge.

C2.P4   Undoubtedly, the thirteen female narrative voices are a powerful driving force that gives formal and structural singularity to the collection. Each unnamed first-person narrator speaks with her own distinctive voice and presents subjective and unique accounts of her quest for emancipation. As the stories unfold, Donoghue narrows the distance between the protagonist and the reader, singling out her universe 'to create unique positionalities in the matrix of social power' (Barros-del Río "Emma Donoghue's", 241). Conceptually, the collection rejects the notion of womanhood as a universal and static category and offers the reader multiple and shifting alternatives that do not accommodate with the fairy-tale scheme. This device gives new insights into the individual contexts of the protagonists, unveiling the many forces that support and deter their advancements.

C2.S3   ## 3   Intersectionality and the Deviations of the Female Plot

C2.P5   Following these premises, Donoghue's rewritings can be considered personal narratives where situated (female) subjects negotiate their identities within a network of relationships. As in any given tale, each character departs from a social position which is in turn conditioned by certain categorical identity markers. Hence, oppressing and privileging practices are shaped by categories such as gender, sexual preference, class, age, race, lifestyle, ethnicity, ability/disability, and so on. These do not only intersect and affect the subject deterring or fostering her agency, but also evolve and mutate in time and space.

Furthermore, the interrelations of these facets are mutually constitutive, that is, they are exerted in interconnected centers of power that condition the possibilities of emancipation (Yuval-Davies). For my purpose, intersectionality is a helpmeet to deconstruct the binary oppositions and universalism upon which the fairy-tale model has traditionally been constructed (Davis). Furthermore, intersectionality 'can highlight the dynamics of agency and structural constraints as a series of situated interplays in which categories can have different roles, weights and consequences in designing power dynamics' (Colombo and Rebughini 446). Given these considerations, intersectionality is an optimal analytical tool to outline the devices that enable patterns of subversion and submission in *Kissing the Witch*. More particularly, McCall's approach to intracategorical analysis (1774) is an appropriate analytical means to focus on the diversity and differences within the group of study, i.e., the female protagonists of Donoghue's fairy tales, as well as the strategies utilized and the results achieved. From this perspective, intersectionality illuminates how *Kissing the Witch* displays audacious and complex strategies for female emancipation within and beyond the boundaries of the fairy-tale genre.

C2.P6   The departing point for this analysis is the different forms of gender inequality present in all thirteen tales. Their protagonists are women who escape, or try to escape, oppressive situations in search of alternative solutions. All of them are negatively affected by a patriarchal organization of values that keep them in a subordinate position. Traditionally, beauty, modesty, caring, and ultimate heterosexual marriage for reproductive purposes have been dimensions that sustained a fixed symbolic representation of female characters in fairy tales such as 'The Beauty and the Beast', 'Snow White', and many other traditional tales. Donoghue's rewritings deviate from traditional representations, as some protagonists are beautiful but others are not; some are raised to believe that they are wonderful whereas others feel they are 'the louse in their bed' (Donoghue 13); some are industrious and others are idle.

By this means, Donoghue aligns with the notion of 'woman' as a 'site of multiple, complex, and potentially contradictory sets of experiences' (Braidotti 4), as the variety of female characters presented in her work confirms.

To all of them, wedlock remains an imposed destination to which they must comply, as expected in traditional versions. Conversely, a distinctive particularity of Donoghue's stories is their discomfort with this normative behaviour. In some stories, Donoghue contests 'the idealized outcomes of fairy tales and their representations of gender and female identity' (Haase 20), as in 'The Tale of the Spinster', where the narrator declares: 'I wouldn't have married even if I could have; I was a woman of business now, a woman of affairs, far too far gone to make a good wife' (Donoghue 125). Donoghue uses this example to question the limitations of agency for female characters and denounces the mutually excluding gendered spheres embedded in patriarchal society, so frequently reproduced in the fairy-tale tradition. In other stories, the protagonists do marry, but too often wedlock turns into an embellished prison despite the material and social rewards it encompasses. This idea is particularly explicit in 'The Tale of the Bird', where a poor young girl marries an older and wealthier but overprotective man. His manor becomes her confinement while she longs for wider spaces, as her words attest: 'In their smooth leather, my feet itched for the stubble of the open fields, and my eyes strained for a far horizon' (Donoghue 19). A similar situation can be found in 'The Tale of the Needle', where the patriarchal logic of confinement in the domestic realm clearly intersects with class and the young maid is confined by her parents to the manor to preserve her health and purity. In both aforementioned tales, as well as in 'The Tale of the Shoe' and 'The Tale of the Apple', this form of captivity comes with leisure and wealth for the higher classes, whereas it implies hard household work for those pertaining to poorer groups. Although the situated categories of gender and class intersect differently, they nonetheless result in dynamic processes that deviate from the norm. Both types of

confinement function as a form of control and provoke the protagonists' feelings of entrapment and longing for wider and more open spaces.

As an alternative, confinement is sometimes eluded through intellectual awakening. Hence, the protagonists metaphorically move away from oppressive symbolic representations of femininity and follow the path set by their foremothers. To that end, Emma Donoghue uses metatextual references to the fairy-tale tradition and dismantles its legitimacy, as in 'The Tale of the Needle', where the narrator laments that in her childhood, 'the only stories were family stories, and they were all the one story' (Donoghue 172). This form of rejection is expressed more directly in 'The Tale of the Rose', where the protagonist admires the queen for '[…] refusing to do the things queens are supposed to do […]' (Donoghue 39–40). Similarly, once she has married the prince, the young maid of 'The Tale of the Handkerchief' reflects: 'I thought of how both of us had refused to follow the paths mapped out for us by our mothers and their mothers before them, but had perversely gone our own ways instead' (Donoghue 80). Quite adeptly, these passages suggest an emerging degree of awareness and objectivity among the protagonists, whilst seeking complicity on the side of the reader at the same time.

Although Donoghue's protagonists try hard to escape their fate, they usually need a friendly hand to help them in their struggle. Often, this takes the form of an older and wiser woman, a secondary character who lives in a tower or a cave.[5] These helpers, who are known

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[5] A marked element in this volume is the use of a female minor character to support the young heroine in her identity construction process. This device had been used before by other Irish women writers, particularly in the *Bildungsroman* format, as in *The Country Girls Trilogy*, by Edna O'Brien and *The Land of Spices*, by Kate O'Brien. According to some studies (Barros-del Río, "Thematic Transgressions"; D'hoker), this literary technique is a necessary device to face the impossibility of articulating an

as witches and sorcerers, become the protagonists of the following stories and impersonate their particular intersection of categories where mature age, (single) status and/or (homo)sexual orientation stand out as especially disadvantaging axes. Remarkable is Donoghue's dexterity in using female outcasts as support elements in the emancipatory processes of the protagonists. Their disadvantaged situatedness not only becomes a precious assistance to the young protagonists but also deconstructs the male-rescuer archetype as the dominant figure (Fernández Rodríguez; Zipes *Fairy Tales*). These sororal relationships, which sometimes develop into lesbian love, have a twofold function: on one hand, they render the male role in fairy tales unnecessary, and they evince age and experience among female characters as valuable assets on the other. With this device, the limitations of the unitary subject are challenged, and the concepts of beauty and love are broadened beyond the boundaries of the traditional fairy-tale genre. The style used in 'The Tale of the Needle' when the old woman imprisoned in the tower instructs the young girl is almost poetic:

C2.P10   Listen, girl, she said, they've tried to stop me from teaching any of the things I know. Now they're trying to prevent you from learning all the things you don't. But gifts can only be delayed.

C2.P11   DONOGHUE 178

C2.P12   Undoubtedly, Donoghue seeks compensation for the shortcomings of her young protagonists and expands the concept of heroine into a self-reinforcing sisterhood. At the same time, she

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emancipatory adventure for one girl alone, which in the case of *Kissing the Witch* is limited by the traditional fairy tale format.

displaces authority from structural categories and social practices, and favours female bonding, experience and knowledge. One tale after another, the reader realizes that the witch was once a young woman also trying to find her own path and so, by naturalising their stories, the author alters fixed meanings of womanhood and forces the reader to admit that to kiss the witch may be a legitimate and natural action after all.

In *Kissing the Witch*, mobility is a recurrent strategy. The young protagonists frequently run away from a claustrophobic physical setting, a device of dissidence that deviates from the fairy-tale plot. But here again, differences among the life narratives stand out too, underlining the multiplicity of stories and the diversity of their protagonists. In some plots, the voyage is a means to escape danger, as in 'The Tale of the Skin', when fearing incestuous sexual assault, the protagonist abandons the castle. But rebellion traditionally entails punishment in the fairy-tale framework and by putting some distance between herself and her father, the protagonist's positionality changes dramatically. In this tale, sexuality stands out as a relevant category that clearly intersects with age and class. Because of her rejection of sexual intercourse, the heroine loses her class privileges, becomes a vagrant and her possibilities of agency remain on the fringes of society. Quite differently, in 'The Tale of the Handkerchief' the voyage becomes an opportunity for the maid, who swaps roles with the princess. Here, the category of class determines the new positionality of the subject and allows her upgrading and royal marriage.[6] As these examples show, categories can be

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[6] Notice that Donoghue repeatedly recurs to society and nature as opposite contexts, identifying the former with norms and the latter as an apt space for resistance and freedom. In social environments the burden of the norms is metaphorically represented with oppressive complements such as a barrel, in 'The Tale of the Handkerchief', a shoe, in 'The Tale of the Shoe', or a mirror, in 'The Tale of the

ambivalent. Even though their intersections dictate the boundaries of female agency at a given moment, they are also dynamic, affecting the subject's potentialities.

In a broader sense, Emma Donoghue uses space as a resource that can be both liberating and isolating. She frequently situates her mature characters in secluded and wild places, like caves and forests, where despite their isolation they can feel free from social constraints. Even though they are outcasts to society, they are also feared and powerful characters. Ironically, they are invested with an aura of wisdom that uplifts them in the eyes of the young protagonists, as the following excerpt from 'The Tale of the Hair' shows: 'The woman was my store of knowledge, my cache of wisdom' (Donoghue 85). Notably, their ambivalent status frequently comes from deviation from the standard paths of marriage, motherhood, beauty or submission. Their audacity is what makes the locals attribute certain powers to them, as is explicitly mentioned in 'The Tale of the Kiss': 'Power […] was invested in me by a village' (Donoghue 213). From an intersectional perspective, this inconsistency can be read as the result of the subject's alteration of positionality at the crossroads of certain axes subject to change, such as status and class, with other given axes such as age, intelligence, or fertility.[7] Their workings, considered from McCall's approach to

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Apple'. On the contrary, in nature, where human essence is evident and cannot be hidden, socially constructed differences tend to disappear, particularly in 'The Tale of the Bird' and 'The Tale of the Handkerchief'.

[7] Among the several categories used by Emma Donoghue in *Kissing the Witch*, race is a missing axis of difference, as Roberts and MacCallum-Stewart have detected. In this volume, Emma Donoghue does not challenge the racial hegemony of the Western fairy-tale tradition, a fact that may be due to her strong influence of American and

intracategorical analysis, disclose one of Emma Donoghue's greatest achievements, namely, her use of categories as 'political tools' (Colombo and Rebughini 447). In her stories, the protagonists take an active role and consciously play with those intersections within the limits of their performativity. The results, in terms of female empowerment, are not always satisfactory but usually produce some insightful and revealing lessons both for the heroines and the reader, as the protagonist of 'The Tale of the Rose' reflects: 'This was a strange story, one I would have to learn a new language to read, a language I could not learn except by trying to read the story' (Donoghue 39).

4   Conclusions

In *Kissing the Witch*, Emma Donoghue reconsiders the boundaries of the traditional fairy tale implementing formal and thematic innovations. Through the lens of intersectionality, *Kissing the Witch* displays different levels of complexity through which the author denounces the limitations of the traditional genre and unveils the differences and potentialities inherent in the category of 'woman'. Her compilation denounces the 'multiple and conflicting experiences of subordination and power' (McCall 1780) embodied in its female characters, and underlines personal change as the only alternative for its 'nomadic subjects' (Braidotti). The stories illustrate their protagonists' capacity of mediation and resistance in their emancipatory processes, which usually require the support of an older female character. Furthermore, Donoghue incorporates a political dimension to her fairy tales, as she recurs to objects and altered characters to identify the traditional tales that lie underneath her adaptations. With this device, the reader's attention is diverted from the protagonist and the politics behind come to light (Barros-del Rio, "Emma Donoghue's"). Consequently, each

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English-speaking critics and authors. Hence, this has not been taken into consideration for analysis.

story is framed by a system of beliefs and norms that limit the agency of the female characters in different ways.

C2.P16   As in traditional fairy tales, Donoghue plays with gender, age and class as determining axes and adds sexual orientation in her re-makings. Using intersectionality as an analytical tool, *Kissing the Witch* demonstrates that those categories are not fixed, but ambivalent, an uncertainty that makes the female characters' search for self-identity much more complex than in the formulaic structure of the wonder tale. Marriage and reproduction are frequently avoided and belittled. The promised fulfillment within manors and palaces is often misleading. Alternatively, isolation in the wild functions as shelter and confinement. Space, age, sexual orientation and class intersect with the protagonists' search for identity in unexpected ways.

C2.P17   Finally, and in spite of granting great relevance to the innovative ways female identities intersect with and are constituted by other social factors, Emma Donoghue vindicates the centrality of women's processes of self-discovery within the frame of the fairy-tale genre, a founding idea that the protagonist of 'The Tale of the Bird' clearly articulates: 'It was a bird that helped me, when I was young, but it could have been anything: a stick, a stone, whatever happened by. The thing is to take your own life in your hands' (Donoghue 11). In conclusion, reading *Kissing the Witch* through an intersectionality lens is far from a simple and amusing voyage into fairy land. On the contrary, it becomes a challenging and engaging act of rebellion.

C2.S5
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