

Re-Imagining Women's History in the Fiction of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Anne Enright, and Kate O'Riordan

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New Irish women writers' historical fiction uses literature to demonstrate how history omits women. Their fiction shows how memories and records of women are at times constructed by denial, hostility, neglect, or self-aggrandizement. Whether one agrees with Eavan Boland, that women have only recently moved from "being the objects of Irish poems to being the authors of them" (*Object Lessons* 126), or with Gerardine Meaney, that rather what is lacking is "awareness" of "women's literary past" (78), the conclusion is the same: the authentic voices of women from the past are rarely heard. The fiction of contemporary women writers in Ireland addresses this absence. This essay analyses the narrative strategies used to re-imagine female pasts in the historical fiction of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Anne Enright, and Kate O'Riordan, whose work speaks competently of the dilemma of the "first world" western feminist intellectual attempting to speak for the "third world" subaltern woman. Gayatri Spivak interrogates this problem in "Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow Sacrifice." Does the intellectual repeat the silencing of these women by presuming to speak for them? Ní Dhuibhne, Enright and O'Riordan fictionalize the absent colonized woman without committing to Spivak's error—the allegedly inevitable usurpation of the subaltern's voice.

Spivak's error, one shared by many postcolonial theorists, is that she does not envision the position of an indigenous Irish woman because she cannot conceptualize the postcolonial conflict outside of the parameters of colorism (bias against people who are "too" light or "too" dark). Rebecca Pelan makes a similar criticism, specifically of Spivak: "Her work reveals a consistent focus on privileging issues of (over generalized) race over those of gender or class" (109). Spivak underestimates the power of art and the artist when she concludes, "The subject of exploitation cannot know and speak the text of female exploitation even if the absurdity of the non-representing intellectual making space for her to speak is achieved" (84). In an article on Seamus Heaney, Eugene O'Brien argues for a greater power for art in representing the shifting relationships in colonial cultures; O'Brien warns against dismissing the power of art and argues against ideological thinning of the "plurality and complexity of the field of force which should be set up in the process of reading" (58).

Ní Dhuibhne's postmodern method goes beyond direct parallels with myth to reiterate the motifs of ancient Irish myth in a contemporary context, suggesting new modes of interpretation for both. Ní Dhuibhne uses a narrative strategy of intertextualizing old Irish myth with contemporary stories, a technique that emphasizes the longevity of practices that silenced women in literature and history. Myth may be the repository of lost histories, memories repressed or denied; indeed, Angela Bourke claims this role for folklore. Ní Dhuibhne's use of myth suggests the enormity of the exclusion of women from literature, and, without speaking for them, her fiction illuminates the process by which women have even colluded in their own exclusion. Ní Dhuibhne's technique often involves juxtaposing a mythical story with a more contemporary one, a view of history characteristic of postcolonial fiction. Patrick Hogan describes Irish writers who "revived characters and tales and modes of storytelling from the Irish epics of the past and the oral traditions of the present" (163) as characteristically postcolonial. According to Hogan, "This approach is pervasive in other post-colonization writing too, from Tagore to Rushdie and Karnad, from Tutuola to Amadi, Soyinka, and Okri" (163). Two of Ní Dhuibhne's early stories employ the folklore motif

of a fairy woman seducing a mortal man. In these stories the fairy comes to live with the mortal, a reversal of the more familiar pattern, where the fairy takes the mortal man to fairyland, as with Oisín and Tír na nÓg.

These women demonstrate characteristics not typical for Irish women in a Catholic culture, suggesting instead, traditional epic women's disturbing independence and sexual assertiveness. As Pelan puts it, "sexuality, however, as represented by powerful female figures, was simply written out of an Irish history that had no place for active heroines—whether mythological ones like Queen Maeve or real ones like Constance Markievicz" (26). In "The Mermaid's Legend," Ní Dhuibhne's modern protagonist is a free-spirited English barmaid who marries a passionate Irishman (from the west). She is, of course, unsuited to life in the rural west and eventually deserts her two children and her husband to return to life as an English barmaid. The ancient story has the woman coming from the sea, suggesting the otherworld of myth and the women of the Sidhe. This woman is also unsuited to domestic life in the west of Ireland and deserts her children and husband. Like her sister the barmaid, she attempts to contact her children, but the otherworld woman reputedly comes up out of the sea now and then to see her children. The barmaid, however, uses the telephone. Both women represent the unwomanly—and un-Irish—practice of deserting children and husbands, suggesting an alternate tradition in pre-Christian antiquity for Irish women than Catholic maternal Mariology. Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, in an article on Neil Jordan's film *The Butcher Boy*, notes "the contradictions embodied in the image of Our Lady, who knew from experience what it was like to cope with an unplanned pregnancy, but is invoked by the fathers of the Church to reprove young women in similar situations" (190). Cullingford connects this image to de Valera's nationalism, "which invested woman's 'life within the home' with a Constitutionally approved aura of Marian sanctity" (193). Linking the contemporary and the ancient women, Ní Dhuibhne's story revises church hegemony over images of maternity, suggesting an alternate tradition that envisions femininity differently.

In "The Mermaid's Legend," a contemporary story is juxtaposed with an older folktale about a fairy woman from the sea; both women have short, passionate affairs with Irish men, have children with them, and then desert both the men and the children. An analogue in manuscript form to the story of the otherworld woman who comes to live with a human exists in the story of Macha, a goddess who moves in with an ancient king in "The Pangs of Ulster." The king violates the taboo of speaking about fairies, brags about her prowess, and causes Macha's death. The outlines of this story suggest a taboo against speaking about women who reject maternity, leave their husbands and children, and disappear into the otherworld. In *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*, Angela Bourke theorizes fairy belief as "an elegant economy of reasoning, imagery and memory" (35) whereby "disruptions to social life are identified as coming from outside, and are forcefully repudiated. [...] For example, the woman 'taken by the fairies' may represent any number of domestic crises from depression to—at the extreme margin, murder—and the audience for this explanation ranged from 'total belief and near-total disbelief in fairies'" (42-43). A system that "allows one thing to be said, while another is meant," fairy legend permits discussion of taboo subjects such as the "dangers and anxieties of childbirth [...] fertility [...] aggression against women" (41). "Mermaid's Legend" dramatizes the atypical historical Irish woman who is not maternal and who in fact deserts her family. We see some of the same themes in Ní Dhuibhne's "A Fairer House."

Feminist critics see a causal relationship between women's silencing and colonialism, a relationship that is dramatized in Ní Dhuibhne's story "Summer Pudding." Ailbhe Smyth blames "the depths of silence imposed on women" on Irish culture, "a culture which has colonized, contained and controlled women's bodies, women's sexuality, with particular

ferocity and tenacity” (143). Speaking more particularly of literature, Gerardine Meaney sees a positive direction to postcolonial theory’s interactions with women’s literary past, producing “complex re-imaginings of history’s relation to narrative and of the multiple factors that go to make up those fictions we understand as our identity” (90). Christine St. Peter also argues a positive outcome to reading contemporary women’s fiction in terms of postcolonial theory because “the historical fiction of contemporary Irish women offers a heuristic way of destabilizing authoritative, distorting notions” (70) about women. “Summer Pudding” illustrates how, like colonized subjects, women have at times colluded in their own misrepresentation in history. The story uses the Great Potato Famine of 1845 to dramatize how histories are falsified in times of great stress and how, in such times, women can collude in their own erasure from history.

Although the nameless protagonist of “Summer Pudding” speaks the truth in her internal monologues, she tells creative and vigorous lies to various audiences in order to survive the catastrophe of the Famine. The story opens disclosing that the two surviving sisters have sold their dead families’ clothes for passage money to Wales, although those clothes were supposed to be burned. The two sisters construct a cover story, a form of Famine-denial, which conciliates their audience. When they meet the Ladies of Llongollen, daughters of the Anglo-Irish aristocrats the Ormondes and Butlers of Kilkenny, the girls lie about their history to allay the ladies’ guilt over the Famine. The Llongollen ladies’ interrogation of the girls demonstrates how fictions about the famine were mutually constructed:

Why did you not go to the workhouse?
We tried to get into it but it was full. Hundreds of people were turned away, not just us.
You did not think of going to America?
We had not the price of a ticket. Maybe...?
But we would not get the price of the ticket from here either, since we never got a penny.
Did your family die?
They all died.
Of the fever?
The fever, yes.
It is the fever that kills people, not the hunger, isn’t it?
Yes ma’am. (55)

However, the narrator continues internally:

We were hungry and that is why the fever got to us. It would not have got us if we had had enough to eat. When we cut through the lumpy potatoes in July, through their brownny-purple, warty skins, and saw them black and sticky inside, soft and sweet, we saw the fever. Their sweet and sickening smell was the smell of the fever. The hunger and the fever were the same thing, although people like to think they were different. (55)

This concoction of decay contrasts sharply with the summer pudding of the title, a rich dessert made in the kitchen of the ladies, indicating two (at least) radically different versions of the Famine. The girls lie about their own past, saying: “‘The hunger was not bad in our village,’ I said to the lady. ‘Everyone had enough. There were a lot of fish in the river, and we had bread and milk, butter. We had corn. The people worked hard and had enough to eat. It was not like other places, in our village’” (55). The girls know that the Ladies are more likely to hire them if they aren’t made to feel guilty about the Famine.

Ní Dhuibhne creates another fictitious memory for her protagonist, which contradicts her public speech and reveals the truth about the Famine:

My father said to me and Mary, the only ones left, after he, and everyone else in our parish, had lost their work on the Relief: 'Kill me and eat me. I will die soon anyway.' It was the beginning of July, hungry July, the beginning of summer. We had dug the first potatoes early. He knew it would be hungry July, hungry August, hungry winter. Again. Half the people in the village were dead. The landlord had sent others to Canada on a ship from Cork but we had heard terrible things about that journey, and about Canada. (60)

Ní Dhuibhne's protagonist illustrates why truth and falsehood were at the mercy of politics for the colonized: as George Dangerfield puts it, "to reveal what was really in their minds would be dangerous: that the truth, while great and prevailing, commonly prevailed against them [...] the real truth [...] was a secret to be acted out in dark and conspiratorial ways" (9). The girls' exchange with the Lady denies the fictions of the famine: that the workhouse and emigration were effective remedies. Terry Eagleton writes in *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* that "fever-ridden workhouses" and "subsidized emigration" were rather the means used by the British government to dispatch "hundreds of thousands to their needless deaths" (24).

The Irish refugees also deny the culpability of the Catholic Church by fantasizing a priest named "Father Tobin" who ministers to the Irish in Wales. We know from George Borrow's travel narrative that he pretended to be a priest to some Irish refugees; Borrow's narrative discusses these Famine refugees extensively without ever mentioning the famine (Moloney and Thompson 110). Borrow believed that the Irish participated in this deception and in his denigration of them as subhuman. When Borrow says "And suppose I were to tell you that I am not Father Tobin? Would you believe me?" The tinker replies, 'We would not, your reverence.' Then Borrow says 'Suppose I were to refuse to give you a blessing?' and the tinker replies, 'We should just make bould to give your reverence a good big bating.' Borrow goes on, 'Are you not a set of great big blackguards?' and the man responds, 'We are, your reverence'" (237-38). Borrow's anthropology constructs the Irish as participating in the fraud of Father Tobin's legitimacy and cheerfully accepting his characterization of them as "blackguards." As a member of the English colonizing class, Borrow probably believes this. However, operating intertextually with "real" history, Ní Dhuibhne inserts a silent character, the narrator, whose thoughts are directly read. Her thoughts represent the colonized mentality of "cunning, exile, and silence." The narrator doubts the story of a priest in Wales who ministered to the Irish there; she teases Naoise about Father Tobin being like a banshee, "someone only your friend's friend has ever laid eyes on" (45). She refuses to kneel for his blessing at the story's end. "Summer Pudding" shows how fiction can reveal more about the past than some histories; fiction can read silence, which is often the language of the oppressed.

Ní Dhuibhne's story also contains several elements that suggest similarities with the old Irish tale, "The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu," for example, exile, adultery, a false friend, and an adventurous, visionary, and sexually assertive woman as the main character. In the tale, the sons of Uisliu are forced into exile from Ireland to Scotland because Deirdre, engaged to King Conchobar, elopes with a young man called Naoise. Similarly, in "Summer Pudding," the Famine exiles the Irish girls to Wales, and they meet a married man named Naoise. Both stories show victims acting against their own best interests in efforts to survive. Deirdre acquiesces in Fergus' plot to get Naoise back to Ireland and kill him, even though she knows better. The girls of "Summer Pudding" lie about their past, representing themselves as

affluent Irish farmers so that the Ladies of Llangollen will employ them. They silently collude in the lie the tinkers tell about “Father Toban,” a Catholic priest ministering to the Irish in exile. The protagonist sees the truth, but she does not speak out. She thinks the Ladies are lesbians because they wear trousers and sleep in the same bed; she disbelieves “Father Toban” and won’t kneel for his blessing. She does, however, return to Ireland with her lover, Naoise, as did Deirdre, and the reader suspects she will meet Deirdre’s catastrophic ending. Finally, in suggesting the old Deirdre legend found in “The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu,” Ní Dhuibhne creates a pattern consistent with Homi Bhabha’s idea that “the archaic emerges in the midst or margins of modernity as a result of some psychic ambivalence” (295), an idea he associates with Freud’s uncanny. The echoes of the saga that we hear in “Summer Pudding” suggest a use of storytelling to cover ambivalent memories of the past similar to Bourke’s argument that: “The essence of fairy-belief is ambivalence [...] occasions of transition and ambiguity [...] the liminal, the marginal, and the ambiguous, whether in time, in the landscape, or in social relations” (“Virtual Reality” 31). Repressed and painful memories of the Famine include the failure of the Anglo-Irish elite in England and the Catholic Church worldwide to provide assistance, as well as the Famine refugees who often died in exile. As George Borrow, Father Tobin, the Catholic Church, and the Ladies of Llangollen completely deny the Famine, so on a smaller scale, the girls falsify their past and indirectly their own courage.

In her short story, “Midwife to the Fairies,” Ní Dhuibhne intertextually intersperses a folk tale with a contemporary narrative, making the point that the practices involved have a long history. If, as Christine St. Peter argues, the fiction of contemporary Irish women uses “a doubled perspective that focuses self-reflexively on troubling continuities and thereby calls into question historiographic practice in Ireland” (70), this short story demonstrates the process through which women’s issues are excluded from public discourse. “Midwife to the Fairies” is a microcosm of several women’s issues that are repressed by the patriarchy; the more woman-centered ideology of the fairy legend emphasizes the contrast. In the contemporary story, a midwife is called out late at night to assist a disturbing birth; the young mother and her family are oddly disengaged from the joyless birth. After the midwife goes home, she learns that the baby had been discovered dead and abandoned “in a shoebox,” and the mother has been arrested. The midwife initially vows to say nothing about the affair but later relents and goes to the police station to make a statement; she does not, however, complete it. Later she is threatened by a member of the baby’s family and resolves to stay silent and turn a blind eye towards the event. The crosscutting of a fairy legend into this story makes several salient points.

Midwifery represents a long subversive tradition of female agency. The midwife, Mary, tells us “my mother did it before me and her mother before her” (24). The midwife’s current job as a nursing assistant in a hospital that is cutting out its maternity ward ironically emphasizes how much that role has been degraded. Nonetheless, neighboring people know she is a midwife and come to her for help outside the margins of legality, giving her extra-legal power in the society. The resistance to women with power comes from several men in the story: Mary’s husband tells her to keep silent and not get involved; a man from the baby’s family threatens her with a knife if she testifies to the police; and the state silences and intimidates her by criminalizing her activity and arrests the mother, an act that does nothing about the conditions that caused the illegitimacy and murder in the first place.

Both stories make the point that female infanticide has a long and widespread history.¹ The older fairy legend, however, blames the “fairies” for the pregnancy and the murder. As Bourke explains, fairy legend functioned in an oral, rural culture as “a way of handling social

deviance and stigma, a vocabulary and a system of metaphor through which to contain the sort of tensions that Victorian administrators preferred to house in grim four-story buildings” (579). Although Bourke is talking about a nineteenth century paradigm, Ní Dhuibhne’s story makes it plain that the tensions continue whether they are rural/urban or English/Irish or male/female. The fairies are known to take children and leave changelings because the originals were not “real” children. The silencing that takes place in the older tale is blamed on fairy legend; everyone knows that if you see the fairies you are not supposed to talk about them. In the folktale, the midwife is magically blinded when she does. In the contemporary story, masculine authority—husband, violence, the police—similarly force the midwife to turn a blind eye and these women’s issues of unwanted pregnancies and abortion only enter into public discourse as criminal. The fairy legend permits more discourse, albeit coded, than the contemporary story. Ní Dhuibhne’s tone in cross-cutting these two stories—neutral and nonjudgmental—makes the point that the modern system is not necessarily better than the old one.

Although “Midwife to the Fairies” is a tale located primarily in the oral folklore tradition, many of its components can be found in the manuscript, “The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel.” The eighth century legend also includes themes of one-eyed persons, infanticide, and the taboo of speaking about the fairies. The motif of female infanticide appears in “The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel” in a similar way as it does in the fairy-legend. In the old story, the victim is a princess, cursed by a druidic priest, condemned to death by the king, and saved by kindly thralls. As in many legends, the rescued infant Étain is elevated to fairyhood and aristocracy, but she may substitute for numerous anonymous female infants killed for less romantic motives than a druidic curse or fairy kidnapping and substitution with a changeling. The legend records the fact of female infanticide, but misrepresents the true causes. The fairies take the blame and provide a rationale for parents’ disposing of inconvenient children, many who were probably female. In the legend, Étain is quite clear about the value of a female child: “Bad is what thou has given me: it will be a daughter that I bear.” The storyteller does not bother to explain the king’s decree that his daughter “should be killed” (Cross and Slover 95). In her intertextual use of myth and folklore, Ní Dhuibhne fulfills St. Peter’s claim about doubling problematizing historiography as it deals with women.

Anne Enright’s interactions with history also confirm St. Peter’s insight. All of Enright’s fiction—*The Portable Virgin*; *The Wig My Father Wore*; *What Are You Like?*—challenges traditional belief systems and epistemologies, often conflating the genres of journalism, history, and fiction to problematize our sense of the past. Her fiction also illustrates Ashis Nandy’s belief that in a postcolonial context “there is no ‘real’ or immutable past, and all constructed pasts and all history are ways of coping with hopes, ambitions, fears and anxieties” (3). In *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch*, Enright fulfills Eavan Boland’s charge to women poets: “Given the relation between image and selfhood, the poet—especially the woman poet—has an ethical obligation to de- and reconstruct those constructs that shape literary tradition, bearing witness to the truths of experience suppressed, simplified, falsified by the ‘official’ record” (Boland 443). Enright’s narrative technique gives her protagonist a voice to tell her own story.

The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch addresses history’s treatment of women who have power and agency. The novel illustrates how hostility towards these women can operate, especially in the absence of information, to both emblemize and demonize them. Enright’s strategies for representing this process include her particular use of imagery, in which, as Penelope Fitzgerald notes, “Metaphors often become the things they stand for” (8). The title of Enright’s short story collection, *The Portable Virgin*, demonstrates this symbolic technique of

translating abstract ideas into tangible objects and back again. The phrase “portable virgin” may refer to actual plastic statuettes of the Virgin Mary that adorn car dashboards whose little blue crown is a screw-off top and its body filled with holy water. However, “portable virgin” also connotes the commodification of virginity into a powerful ideological gender system. As Cullingford demonstrates, virginity as a symbol has been used to represent the contradictory requirements of Irish women to be both maternal and chaste, the symbol of the nation and confined to the home (190-93).

Enright demonstrates her view of history in *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch*, where she describes her characters as “the kind of people who attracted stories—not to mention bias, rumours, lies, rage: the whole tangle pulled into a knot by time, made Gordian by history” (2). Unlike Lynch’s biographers, who respond to their subject with what she calls “sneering excess” (231), Enright’s novel explains the influence of historians’ hostilities to Eliza’s history. Eliza’s biographers illustrate the principle that history abhors a vacuum. In the absence of information, women’s histories can become blank pages for their biographers to invent upon. Many biographies of Eliza Lynch devote a relatively small percentage of the book to Lynch, the avowed subject. Biographers instead chronicle the disaster of Francisco Lopez, Eliza’s paramour, and dictator of Paraguay, and his war against Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay; a war that disintegrates into virtual genocide against his own people. When they do discuss Eliza, the texts often reveal more about the authors’ attitudes towards women or towards the Irish than towards Eliza.

For example, consider Eliza’s marriage. Enright’s Eliza gives her version of her marriage to M. Quatrefages as: “he took advantage of my tender years to spirit me away to Kent and marry me there” (45). Enright’s Eliza speaks, characterizing herself as a teenager, who although seductive, has been exploited. A biography of Eliza published in 2003, *The Empress of South America*, by Nigel Cawthorne, however, explains fourteen-year-old Eliza’s marriage to forty-year-old Quatrefages this way: “The fourteen-year-old Eliza took her middle-aged Catholic lover across the Channel to Kent” (59). William E. Barratt’s 1938 biography contends that, “in the bloody saga of Francisco Lopez, Ella Lynch shared both authority and responsibility” (viii). Henry Lyon Young’s 1966 biography characterizes the marriage of the fourteen-year-old Eliza as, “her very lack of emotion was her strength” (42). A contemporary of Eliza, George Masterson, contends she “virtually was the ruler of Paraguay” (335). Young also demonstrates considerable anti-Irish sentiment in inventing these glosses to the Famine in Eliza’s early biography: “she still had visions of her father lifting a glass of whisky to his lips [...] the alcohol only accentuated the burning hunger” (33). Her parents left Ireland as Famine refugees, Young editorializes, and “with true Irish improvidence her parents had just abandoned the house” (33).

Enright presents a less demonic Eliza by fast cutting and interjecting flashbacks of her as a younger, more vulnerable woman, into the narrative of cruelty and barbarism that is Paraguay’s history during Lopez’s rule. Eliza relates her youth herself: “When I was sixteen, I think I was beautiful. But that was three years ago” (33). The novel creates older male characters, friends of Eliza’s father, who exploit her sexuality, suggesting her father’s culpability. Eliza talks about her first affair: “The first man who cried for me (my dear friend) was Bennett—the man who liked my father enough to lend him three hundred pounds; who liked me enough to press his lips against my young feet and then rise, weeping, the length of me, as I stood there looking at the wall [...] I wanted to say something about the moment when necessity turns to love—because I always felt the tug of my father’s three hundred pounds” (97-100). Eliza suggests that Bennett paid for sex with her by “loaning” her father three hundred pounds. Enright’s novel is able to capture and remedy the process whereby

contradictions of admiration and disgust, love and hate, and adulation and loathing constructed the historical Eliza Lynch. Enright's technique of transposing metaphors into the objects they stand for suggests the symbolization that translates a powerless young woman into an icon of a nation: "Her dress, it seems, is spun gold. Her underskirts are lapis lazuli, the colour of the night sky when it glows. Five-diamond clusters knuckle around her throat, and a deep sapphire pendant hangs over her bodice. [...] She belongs to them all. So tender she is, to the poor, the crippled, the ailing, you might think her touch enough to make them whole" (63). Ritually dressed in blue, gold, and diamonds to convey images of Our Lady—regency and power—she is also depicted as maternal and nurturing, miraculously curing her people.

Enright's novel explains how a woman can be simultaneously disempowered in a male-dominated world (Lopez never married Eliza), and also blamed for everything that goes wrong. Like Eve, Helen of Troy, and Dervorgilla, Eliza is blamed for all the evil committed around her and is considered to have caused the men to perform it. Rhiannon Talbot makes a similar point about the construction of women terrorists: "When the woman's culpability as a killer is accepted, her femininity is denied and she is perceived as being far more ruthless than her male counterpart" (179). Enright's Eliza speaks for herself as a narrator in the novel. As a speaking subject, she articulates the paradox of woman's powerless power:

For every enemy that he (Lopez) has, I have two, because for every man that hates him there is another who says that whatever he does, it is at my urging; because a woman's ambition is a fathomless thing—as though I was some witch who hexed him into my bed. [...] A woman has no limits, because she may not act. She is all reputation, because she may not act. So, even as we do nothing, our reputations grow more impossible, and fragile, and large. (151)

Eliza demonstrates an understanding of feminism's premise that "woman" does not exist because women are over-determined as symbols, thus erasing real women. In her fiction, Enright writes women back into history by fictionalizing their voices, thoughts, opinions, and feelings. As Enright herself says, "When women have been silent so long, you have to read the silences really urgently: the silences and also the illusions and the slippages" (Moloney and Thompson 63).

Like Enright's fiction, Kate O'Riordan's novels demonstrate how history erases women and the negative consequences of that erasure. In her third novel, *The Boy in the Moon*, O'Riordan uses the journal of a barely literate farmwoman to re-imagine her hidden history, demonstrating the continued necessity of feminist projects that recover lost texts. O'Riordan's use of the journal gives voice to the rural Irish farm woman, previously all but inarticulate, while avoiding usurpation or exploitation of that woman. The rediscovered journal reveals what Ruth Scurr calls "odd, censored glimpses of an unspoken history" (22). Kersti Tarien also notes O'Riordan's "focus on the importance of boundaries between past and present" (279). In addition to the journal, the novel also uses such other feminist strategies as dual historical plots, employing the "twoness" of Joan Kelly's theory of "doubled vision" (quoted in Fox-Genovese 4). O'Riordan also uses a particularly "Irish" metaphor: the politically "mixed" marriage (English/Irish or Catholic/Protestant) that participates in the technique Eve Patten discusses, in which "the author uses to maximum extent the education and disillusionment of its central character as a means of exposing redundant or pernicious aspects of his society's cultural conventions" (142). O'Riordan's novel uses the journal's focus on family memories and records to reveal a broad but secret pattern of child abuse in rural Ireland that had victimized the protagonist's husband and his siblings.

The strained family relationships of O’Riordan’s protagonist exemplify elements of the Irish family romance, dominated by questions of nationality and politics. *The Boy in the Moon* begins with the tragic death of Sam, the eight-year old son of Julia and Brian Donovan. On their way to a Christmas visit to Brian’s family in the west of Ireland, Sam is killed in a bizarre accident: Brian allows Sam to fall forty feet off a castle wall, which Julia sees from afar. Julia later discovers that this event parallels the death of Brian’s twin Noel, also at eight years of age, for which Brian blames himself. Sam’s death divides the couple physically and mentally: Julia goes to Ireland, moves in with Brian’s father and works on his farm. After several weeks heavily medicated in the hospital, Brian is coaxed back to society by Julia’s parents. Both Julia and Brian punish themselves for Sam’s death: Julia with silence and arduous farm work with her father-in-law, a man she despises: Brian by “taking his beating” and not committing suicide. This family’s cross-dressing emphasizes the contrasts between Brian’s rural Irish upbringing and Julia’s suburban English one, as well as the enormous cultural divide between Brian and Julia’s life in London and that of Brian’s parents in the west of Ireland. This divide hints at the difficulty of the present representing the past, a difficulty O’Riordan overcomes by using Brian’s mother’s journal.

O’Riordan represents Margaret, Brian’s long-dead mother, as a text, suggesting through its silences and gaps what it cannot say, the narrative of the subaltern woman. The novel’s protagonist, Julia, discovers Margaret’s journal that reveals that her husband, Jeremiah, was responsible for his own son’s death. O’Riordan avoids the trap Spivak describes the western intellectual as falling into when describing the east: “The question is how to keep the ethnocentric Subject from establishing itself by selectively defining an Other” as the shadow of the self (Spivak 87). In the journal we see briefly Margaret’s resistance to her husband’s brutality, and it metonymically suggests an entire register of women’s silent resistance. There is nothing utopian about this resistance, however, as it does nothing to mitigate the suffering of the children. O’Riordan “reads” Margaret, Julia’s mother-in-law, from a western farm, very much like that of her own Bantry Bay childhood, by having Julia (ironically a speech therapist) discover and read Margaret’s journal. Asked if her own grandmother was a model for Margaret, O’Riordan said:

It did come from observing my own grandmother. Everything she buys she writes down in a little book and the price beside it. There’s no need for her to do that anymore, because she is comfortable now, she has enough money. But she’s still doing that from the time she had nine kids and wasn’t quite sure what was going on the table tomorrow. (Moloney and Thompson 210)

Margaret’s journal is also minimalist—primarily a collection of lists of crops, farm products, meals, costs—which only rarely reveals an insight into Margaret’s consciousness. Julia must supplement the journal and interpret it, much as the reader does. When O’Riordan “quotes” the journal, she includes advice from Julia on how to read it: “Julia felt as if she could read between the lines now [...] the almost tongue in cheek codes” (176).

The journal is initially described by Brian, as a boy, as “a small leather-bound book [...] tiny handwriting [...] meticulous detailing of the daily tasks on the farm. Season to season, she outlined every calving, every harvest, every crop lost to rain. She listed each field by name and the crop rotation in that field for the season. She even listed how many potatoes she had boiled for the evening’s supper” (91). After Sam’s death, Julia finds the journal and says: “the leaves which were parchment-dry and brittle, browned at the corners [...] She had read through the birth and death of the first stillborn, recounted in terms as dry and dusty as old

cake, so that Julia felt nothing for this arid scribe” (102). When Julia finds the entry about Jeremiah’s murder of his son, she shows it to others and directs their reading of it. When Brian’s cousin, Cathal, maintains Noel’s death was an accident: “She pulled the diary from her pocket, quickly ruffling through with one hand until she found the page she wanted. She thrust it at him. No Accident.” (264). The reader doesn’t hear the journal directly but is told that Cathal’s “shocked, crumpled face told Julia everything she needed to know.” Julia also shows her husband Brian the diary and how to read it: “You didn’t kill your brother, Brian [...] It’s all there, in your mother’s journal [...] ‘Read it,’ she said quietly, opening the pages for him because his hands were trembling too much” (264). Much like the readers of Margaret’s journal, the reader of women’s history needs to read its gaps and its silences. Asked about Julia’s reading of Margaret’s diary as the feminist activity of recovery of lost texts and voices, O’Riordan said:

Margaret is a woman who didn’t have a voice in rural Ireland, not too long ago. She was even in an arranged marriage, which my grandmother also was, and very often wouldn’t even be able to read and write, so her young son was teaching his mother as he learned. Her husband didn’t even know she could write, never mind keep a diary. I don’t think she was unique there. She would probably have had between ten to fourteen kids, and running a farm, everything is centered around what you will eat next. It wouldn’t have given a woman like her time to do anything except exist. [...] But she felt some compulsion, didn’t she, to record just the most basic things.
(Moloney and Thompson 209-10)

O’Riordan’s narrative strategy—having Julia read Margaret’s journal—avoids Spivak’s dictum that “the small peasant proprietors ‘cannot represent themselves; they must be represented. Their representative must appear simultaneously as their master, as an authority over them’” (Spivak 71). The journal functions as an intermediary between a “third-world” peasant (Margaret) and a “first world” intellectual (Julia). O’Riordan’s historicizing strategy represents the enormity of that gap without patronizing Margaret, the traditional, rural, agrarian “other.”

The fictions of Ní Dhuibhne, Enright, and O’Riordan contradict Spivak’s dismissive assumption about the usefulness of “first world” feminist theory to “third world” women; Spivak argues that it collaborates “with the work of imperialist subject-constitution, mingling the epistemic violence with the advancement of learning and civilization. And the subaltern woman will be as mute as ever” (90). However, the historical fiction of these three women writers uses myth, biography, and family history to deconstruct simplistic essentialist hierarchies of good/bad, female/male, rural/urban, and Irish/English, creating a voice for the subaltern woman.

1 In an interview, Ní Dhuibhne comments on infanticide: “These stories are commonplace in newspapers from the nineteenth century, which I look at in the National Library often; it’s quite remarkable how often you find accounts of court cases about cases of child murder. It seems to have been a common feature of Irish life” (Moloney and Thompson 108).

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