The Magic Power of Telling and Re-telling in *Kissing the Witch*[1]

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Abstract Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* (1997) is a "revolutionary" rewrite of Western classical fairy tales. One distinct narrative feature of these tales is that one tale leads to another and upon finishing her tale, the female character narrator becomes the narratee/listener of the next story told by the narratee/listener in the previous tale. In this way each character narrator is both the story teller and the listener. The fact that these character narrators are story readers, tellers, re-tellers as well as listeners raises important cognitive and rhetorical questions. What worldviews do these character narrators hold and what cognitive viewpoints do they have about their counterparts in the canonical tales? What effects have they achieved by telling their stories? And what does Donoghue intend to achieve by telling these female characters' tales? Following the line of inquiry of cognitive and rhetorical theory of narrative, this paper argues that the female characters develop critical views of the classic fairy tale and become courageous re-creators of their lives, that their telling has made their listeners become stronger personalities, and that Donoghue's telling invites the general reader to be active storytellers and directs their attention to the positive role that fairy tale can play in postmodern era.

Key words Emma Donoghue; *Kissing the Witch*; fairy tale; re-telling; character narration

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1 This is part of the research outcome of the project "A Cognitive Narratological Reading of Contemporary Fairy Tale Rewritings and Adaptations"（GD15XWW12）is funded by the 2015 Annual Joint Development Project of the 12th Five-Year Plan of Philosophy and Social Science of Guangdong Province.

novels, and Narrative Studies.

Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* (1997) is acclaimed as a "revolutionary" rewrite of classical fairy tales by *The San Francisco Examiner & Chronicle*. As the tales create female characters who represent multiple types of female desires, they are studied from the perspective of feminism and postmodernism.[1] And because of the revelation of homosexual desires in many of the tales and the existence of textual and formal "queer moments" in them, the tales also attract queer reading.[2]

One distinct narrative feature of Donoghue's book is that one tale leads to another, each of which, except the last one, is told by a female figure about herself, a popular fairy-tale figure, to a narratee/listener who, more often than not, is also a familiar fairy-tale figure. Upon finishing her tale, this female character narrator becomes the narratee/listener of the next story told by the narratee/listener in the previous tale. In this way each character narrator is both the story teller and the listener. In addition, all these character narrators talk about their important relationship with another female character in the story. As each of these storytellers does all the talking and the narratee/listener remains in the background, it creates the effect that the teller is also talking to the general reader. As Jennifer Orme notes, *Kissing the Witch* has a distinct storytelling situation which encodes "dialogue between tellers that creates a feeling of intimate reciprocity among narrator, narratee, and reader" (Orme 121).

The fact that these character narrators are story readers, tellers, re-tellers as well as listeners raises important cognitive and rhetorical questions. What worldviews do these character narrators hold and what cognitive viewpoints do they have about their counterparts in the canonical tales? What effects have they achieved by telling their stories? And what does Donoghue intend to achieve by telling these female characters' tales? Following the line of inquiry of cognitive and rhetorical theory of narrative, this paper argues that the female characters develop critical views of the classic fairy tale and become courageous re-creators of their lives, that their telling has made their listeners become stronger personalities, and that Donoghue's telling invites the general reader to be active storytellers and directs their attention to the

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1 Abigail L. Palko, "'No Mother nor Nothing to me': Excavating the Maternal Figure in *Kissing the Witch*." *Women's Studies* 44 (2015) 917.

2 Martine Hennard Dutheil, "Queering the Fairy Tale Canon: Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch*." *Fairy Tales Reimagined: Essays on New Retellings*. Eds. Susan Redington & Bobby Jefferson (NC: McFarland, 2009) 13-30.

positive role that fairy tale can play in postmodern era.

Fictional Minds, Social Minds, and Character Narration

Alan Palmer believes that "Fictional narrative is in essence the presentation of fictional mental functioning" (Palmer, *Fictional Minds* 117). He uses the term "embedded narratives" to mean "the whole of a character's mind in action: the total perceptual and cognitive viewpoint; ideological worldview; memories of the past; and the set of beliefs, desires, intentions, motives, and plans for the future of each character in the story as presented in the discourse" (Palmer, *Fictional Minds* 184). That is to say, by studying the embedded narratives of a character, the character's mental functioning can be understood. In the meanwhile, Palmer pays attention to social minds, also called "intermental thought," which is "joint, group, shared, or collective" thought, and is "opposed to intramental, or private, individual thought" (Palmer, "Social Minds" 196). *Kissing the Witch* creates thirteen distinct female characters who, apart from the witch figure in the last tale, are also familiar figures in canonical fairy tales. The stories they each tell reveal that they grow up with classical fairy tales and that they strive to take a path different from the one prescribed by the classical tales. So how different are these characters from their counterparts in the canonical fairy tales? And since each of these characters is inextricably related with another female figure in her story, do these two females belong to the same social mind?

Most classical fairy tales are narrated by the third-person omniscient narrator. In contrast, Donoghue assigns each of her female protagonists the function of narrator. Thus, distinct female voices reverberate the whole collection. It is true that Donoghue is not the first fairy-tale writer who employs the first-person female narration. Back in the 1970s, Angela Carter rewrote several popular fairy tales in first-person female character narration in her seminal collection *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*. But Donoghue goes one step further by endowing each female protagonist with the power to tell her own story. This character narration, according to James Phelan, is "an art of indirection, one in which the same text simultaneously communicates two different purposes to two different audiences" (Phelan 7). In other words, while the character narrator is communicating his/her perspective to the narratee, the implied author is communicating his/her perspective to the audience. Therefore, what messages do these character narrators in *Kissing the Witch* want to convey to their listeners? What effects have they achieved? By retelling classical fairy tales Donoghue acts as both the reader and the teller, so what purposes does she want to achieve?

In light of cognitive and rhetorical theory of narrative, the following three sections try to answer the above questions. The first section looks into the character narrators' views of their counterparts and the development of their own worldviews. The second section discusses these character narrators' purposes and effects of telling. The third and final section explores the effects of Donoghue's rewriting on the reader.

Character Narrators' Distinct Worldviews and Bond with Other Women

In each tale in *Kissing the Witch*, the "I" tells the listener/narratee about her path to growth, by constantly referring to the classical versions as well as showing her important relationship with another woman. What does her telling reveal about her worldview? And what kind of relationship is established between her and the other woman in her story?

Due to limited space, this essay focuses two tales — "The Tale of the Shoe" and "The Tale of the Handkerchief" — for discussion. Like other tales in the story sequence, these two tales reveal the mental functioning of both the character narrator and her counterpart in the classical versions. In addition, while "The Tale of the Shoe" involves two female figures who differ greatly in age, "The Tale of the Handkerchief" has two female characters who belong to opposite social classes. The difference in either age or social class may serve as an important indicator of the relationship between the two females.

The shoe motif in the title indicates that "The Tale of the Shoe" is a Cinderella story. The Cinderella figure "I" is grieved over the loss of her mother and haunted by the sense of guilt. A female stranger who is of the girl's mother's age comes to her and claims that she knows the girl's mother. With the help of this woman the girl succeeds in attending the ball three times. She wins the heart of the prince, but to her disappointment she finds out that he is aging and ailing. In the meanwhile, she is surprised to find that the woman is beautiful. She decides to return home with the woman.

A close look at the girl's embedded narratives yields the finding that she first identifies with Cinderella but ultimately realizes that the patriarchal norms underlying Charles Perrault and the Grimm Brothers' tale suppress her real desires, thus she decides to take a different path. The girl has been a faithful reader and practitioner of the classic tale. After her mother's death, she follows the gender roles and social norms that the classic tale promotes. So she listens to the "shrill voices" inside her mind: "Do this, do that, you lazy heap of dirt" (Donoghue 2), and does all kinds of house chores. Obviously, these voices come from Cinderella's

stepfamily and the Cinderella figure is too familiar with these voices to forget them, although she admits that "Nobody made me do the things I did, nobody scolded me, nobody punished me but me" (Donoghue 2). She knows exactly what she is supposed to do upon arriving at the palace ball: "I knew just how I was meant to behave. I smiled ever so prettily when the great doors swung wide to announce me" (Donoghue 4). At the end of the first night at the ball she knows what she is expected to do: "But I didn't have to listen to the barking voices to know how the story went: my future was about to happen. Take me back tomorrow night, I said" (Donoghue 5). And upon hearing the prince's proposal, she says, "I could hardly hear him. The voices were shrieking, Yes yes yes say yes before you lose your chance you bag of nothingness" (Donoghue 7). These "voices" that the "I" hears on these two occasions are not the voices of Cinderella's stepfamily, but those of the readers and listeners who have totally accepted the popular stories' doctrines. To put it another way, these voices represent the intermental thought or the social mind of the mainstream culture. The classical fairy tale has exerted such a profound influence on the Cinderella figure that she has internalized the patriarchal values that the tale carries and become an incarnation of Cinderella, an obedient and self-effacing girl, and a representative of uncritical readers and listeners of classical tales. Therefore, although the stepmother figure appears and helps to transform her physical image: "My old dusty self was spun new. This woman sheathed my limbs in blue velvet. I was dancing on points of clear glass" (Donoghue 3), she thinks that the age difference between the woman and her matters much: "But she [the woman] was old enough to be my mother, and I was a girl with my fortune to make" (Donoghue 4). These words also reveal the fact that at the beginning the girl does not know the woman well and holds a contemptuous attitude towards her, thinking that this woman is just an ordinary person whereas she has a promising future. In other words, she thinks she will live happily ever after if she follows the classical Cinderella script.

These two female figures may not function as a social mind in the beginning, but they eventually do. The "I" comes to realize that the prince does not suit her and that the woman is really what she wants: "I had got the story all wrong. How could I not have noticed she was beautiful?" (Donoghue 7). Although the woman says "I'm old enough to be your mother" (Donoghue 8), she is determined to revise the classical script by rejecting the intermental thought implanted in the popular stories, and chooses the woman as her life companion. The dialogue between her and the older woman toward the end of the story shows that these two female characters finally function as a social mind:

> What about the prince? She [the woman] asked.
> He'll find someone to fit, if he looks long enough.
> What about me? She asked very low. I'm old enough to be your mother.
> You're not my mother, I said. I'm old enough to know that. (Donoghue 8)

The Cinderella figure's words, "I'm old enough to know that," has two implications. For one thing, she is no longer the immature girl who needs a mother figure. In other words, she is no longer the girl who kept wishing that her mother was not dead so that she could plan her future for her. For another, she has decided to follow her own heart instead of holding on to social norms. Since the two female characters have bonded sufficiently, it does not make any difference whether it is the girl who takes the woman home, or it is the woman who takes the girl home. The social mind of the girl and the woman empowers both of them.

Like "The Tale of the Shoe," the two female characters in "The Tale of the Handkerchief" do not bond at first. The title indicates that it is a revision of Brothers Grimm's "Goose Girl". But unlike Grimm's tale where neither the princess nor the maid is given a chance to reveal their intramental thought, Donoghue's tale is narrated by the maid figure and focalized through her, thus revealing her as a critical reader and challenger of the classic tale. She defies the social mind of the ruling class, the belief that one's social identity is fixed. The mother of the maid figure obeyed this social mind and asked her to do the same: "My own mother died young and tired, having made me promise to be a good maid for the rest of my days" (Donoghue 62-63). However, the maid figure aims to disrupt this social mind and snatches away the princess's handkerchief, a symbol of her royal identity. In the maid's eyes, the princess and her mother are not worth her respect: "If I had such a mother I would never have left her to journey into a strange country" (Donoghue 64). However, as soon as she enters into the prince's kingdom, she is in constant fear that the real princess will expose her false identity and decides to return the handkerchief to her. But her perception of the princess proves to be wrong. Instead of taking a revenge on the maid as the princess does in the classic tale, the princess figure refuses to take back the handkerchief and is content with her new identity as a goose girl. It is true that at first the princess figure internalizes the social mind of the mainstream culture and behaves in accordance with this social mind. When her mother, the Queen, chooses for her the prince, she accepts obediently: "The girl[the princess] said neither yes nor no; it was not her question to answer" (Donoghue 63). But gradually she has come to know that she fits the identity of goose girl more

than the identity of princess. Thus, while the classic tale aims to teach the lesson that one's identity remains fixed throughout one's life, Donoghue's tale means the opposite, believing that one's original identity may not fit her so that it is not necessarily a bad thing to have a new identity. The maid-turned princess admits that she is not fit for a princess: "I was always nervous, when I was a princess, in case I would forget what to do. You fit the dresses better; you carry it [the handkerchief] off" (Donoghue 78). Similarly, the princess-turned maid is not content to be a servant but wants to be a princess from an early age. She believes that she can act like a princess: "I found that I knew how to behave like a princess, from my short lifetime of watching" (Donoghue 72). Once again it shows that identity is not fixed.

Although these two girls appear to be enemies, they actually have similar views of the nature of human identity. Therefore, they bond in an indirect way. The power of their social mind enables them to find their right places in their lives, as the princess-turned maid says towards the end of the story:

> 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, and I wondered whether this would bring us more or less happiness in the end. (Donoghue 80)

Although the princess-turned maid is not sure whether the life she chooses for herself will make her happier or not, the important thing for her is that she decides her own fate. Her later life is depicted in "The Tale of the Apple," where she becomes the stepmother of Snow White and develops a close relationship with the latter. Together they rule the country after Snow White's father dies. So she has been in charge of her own life.

Both "The Tale of the Shoe" and "The Tale of the Handkerchief" trace the trajectory of a girl's growth. Both girls confront conventional cultural wisdom promulgated by the classical tales and decide to take charge of their own lives. The two tales also depict complicated relations between females. These females may have misunderstood each other or may be enemies at the beginning, but ultimately the misunderstanding or hostility dissolves into mutual understanding and support. What the tales in *Kissing the Witch* have in common is that the female protagonists are critical readers of classical tales or gradually become such a reader, that they have revised or decide to revise the tales to accommodate their different desires and ambitions that have been suppressed by the mainstream culture, and that they establish or are willing to establish new group norms with other women. Although

this means that their future happiness is not guaranteed, they have resolved to do so. For instance, the Thumbelina figure of "The Tale of the Bird" comes to the realization that heteronormativity embodied in the nuclear family that she and her husband set up has imprisoned her, so she determines to step out of it, with the encouragement of the bird that was actually a Beauty figure in its former life. The Snow White figure of "The Tale of the Apple" has been following Brothers Grimm's "Snow White" script but comes to the knowledge that she has been fooled and finally bonds with her stepmother. Indeed, forming a bond with other women is a distinct feature of Donoghue's story collection. Martin argues that the collection highlights generational collaborations.[1] In fact, girls also bond or have the intention to bond, as is clearly shown in "The Tale of the Rose" and "The Tale of the Apple."

Effectiveness of Telling and Re-telling

Apart from "The Tale of the Shoe" whose character narrator "I" may be understood to tell her story directly to the reader, as it is not indicated anywhere in the story that she is telling to a particular person, all the remaining twelve tales have a specific listener, who is the teller of the previous tale and it is this teller who asks for the next story. Another common feature of these twelve tales is that they all begin with the previous storyteller's same question "Who were you?" and the listener/next teller's same answer "Will I tell you my own story?". Obviously these tellers and listeners are interested in each other's story and are ready to tell their own. So why are these female characters interested in other females' stories and eager to tell theirs? What effects has their telling achieved?

Since "The Tale of the Rose" and "The Tale of the Apple" are rewrites of "Beauty and the Beast" and "Snow White" respectively, which are among the most popular classical fairy tales and have been retold by writers such as Angela Carter, Donald Barthelme and Francesca Lia Block, and also because the teller of "The Tale of the Rose" becomes the listener of "The Tale of the Apple," which signals the dual identity of each character narrator in the whole collection, these two tales are selected for a close examination. Like the tales discussed in the previous section, these two tales also demonstrate the female protagonists' recognition of the canonical fairy tales' negative implications and their critique and revision of these tales. The Beauty figure "I" in "The Tale of the Rose" identifies with the red rose which, instead of being the symbol of innocence sanctioned by Madame de Beaumont's "Beauty and the Beast," symbolizes improbability and perfection, as

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1 Ann Martin, "Generational Collaborations in Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch*: Old Tales in New Skins." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 35.1 (Spring, 2010): 4-25.

she declares at the outset of her tale: "I wanted something improbable and perfect as a red rose just opening" (Donoghue 27). She knows exactly what she wants and is ready to take challenges. Therefore, unlike the popular Beauty who anticipates danger and fear on the way to the beast's castle, she goes there with excitement: "but I was shaking with excitement....but for the first time in my life I seemed to own myself. I went as a hostage, but it seemed as if I was riding into battle" (Donoghue 31). Her telling reshapes her life. Likewise, "The Tale of the Apple" also exposes the strong influence of classic fairy tales on people. When the Snow White figure first meets the stepmother figure who is of her age, she cannot help but regard the latter as a vicious figure: "I would have taken her hand in mine if I had not found it weighed down by the ruby stolen from my mother's cooling finger. I could have loved her if, if, if" (Donoghue 46). And although the stepmother figure shows her affection for her, she has doubts about her motive: "But I knew from the songs that a stepmother's smile is like a snake's" (Donoghue 46). So, even though her stepmother begs her to return to the kingdom and rule the country together, she refuses. Only when she finds out to her relief that the apple that causes her to lose consciousness is not poisoned but "the first apple of the year from my father's orchard" (Donoghue 58), does she realize that her stepmother does not mean to harm her.

In fact, the character narrators' act of revealing the negative impact of classical fairy tales and revising them has achieved positive effects on the narratee/listener as well as on the general reader.

First of all, the dialogue between the teller of the previous tale and the teller of the next tale, a distinct feature of Donoghue's story sequence, fully demonstrates these female figures' interest in each other's life and their recognition of the power of storytelling. "The Tale of the Rose" follows "The Tale of the Bird" and is preceded by a dialogue between Thumbelina, the teller of "The Tale of the Bird," and the Beauty figure of "The Tale of the Rose," who acts as the listener of the previous tale and the teller of the next one:

> In a whisper I [Thumbelina] asked,
> Who were you [the bird]
> Before you took to the skies?
> And the bird said,
> Will I tell you my own story?
> It is a tale of a rose. (Donoghue 25)

In this dialogue, Thumbelina is eager to learn about the bird's story, and the bird

is equally eager to tell. Since the bird is telling its previous life as a woman, it functions as the narrating "I" telling the story of the experiencing "I." So there is a knowledge gap between the narrator and the character. The narrator does not disclose the true identity of the beast until the end of the story, so Thumbelina, who is the narratee within the tale, and the experiencing "I," as well as the reader, are all kept in the dark about the true identity of the beast. The instability and tension of the narrative progression is resolved only when the narrating "I" depicts the scene where the experiencing "I" pulls off the beast's mask and veil and finds to her great surprise that the beast is actually a beauty. Like the experiencing "I," we readers have not expected to see beneath the mask a girl's face resembling Snow White: "I saw hair black as rocks under water. I saw a face white as old linen. I saw lips red as a rose just opening" (Donoghue 39).

The Beauty figure is also an active reader, trying to read the beast's story after finding out its true identity as a beautiful woman: "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). The significance and power of storytelling is emphasized here. The Beauty figure believes that the only way that may help her to gain a good understanding of the so-called beast is to read her story. And because of the efforts she has made to read the beast's story, she gradually understands the beast, which in turn enables her and the beast to bond sufficiently. Together they make their story: "I... make sense of *our* story" (Donoghue 40; my emphasis). Thus by telling her story the Beauty figure shows the listener Thumbelina her adventurous and defiant personality. In addition, by exposing the strong impact of the classical "Beauty and the Beast" tale on her, she exposes the heterosexual norm inscribed on the inherited tale. Although Thumbelina does not mention in her tale "The Tale of the Bird" when and how she parts company with her over-protective husband, we can infer from "The Tale of the Shoe" where she enters into the Cinderella figure's life and acts as a mentor figure that she probably learns from the life experience of the Beauty figure and becomes a stronger personality. And she also revises the evil image of stepmother that classical tales have constructed and perpetuated and reconstructs an understanding stepmother figure who is ready to offer help and give support to the Cinderella figure.

The tale that follows "The Tale of Rose" is "The Tale of the Apple". Similar to the former, this tale is also initiated by the teller of the previous tale, that is, the Beauty figure, and the "beast" is eager to tell her own story:

> Another summer in the rose garden,

> I[Beauty] asked,
> Who were you [the beast]
> Before you chose a mask over a crown?
> And she said,
> Will I tell you my own story?
> It is a tale of an apple. (Donoghue 41)

Like the dialogue that precedes "The Tale of the Rose," this dialogue also makes manifest the eagerness of both the teller and the listener to know about each other.. And like the narrating "I" in the previous tale, the narrating "I" in "The Tale of the Apple" also refrains from telling her full understanding about her stepmother until the end of the story. The fact that the experiencing "I" gets fainted by the first apple that turns out to belong to her household carries an ironic message: the Snow White figure is symbolically killed by the popular belief implanted in the classic version — that the stepmother figure is definitely evil. By telling her story, the Snow White figure demonstrates her growth from a passive recipient of classical tales to a critical reader. By wearing a veil over her face she probably has the intention of asking her listener, the Beauty figure, to find out the truth on her own. In fact, each character narrator in *Kissing the Witch* sets an example for her listener/narratee. The Thumbelina figure in "The Tale of the Bird" tells her listener, the Cinderella figure, that "it was a bird that helped me, when I was young" (Donoghue 11). "The Tale of the Rose" shows that this bird is a Beauty figure in its former life and that the Beauty figure learns much from the beast figure, who in turn learns from the stepmother figure, and so on and so forth. In so doing, the teller's influence on the listener is clearly and effectively demonstrated.

Power of Donoghue's Rewriting on the Reader

Phelan maintains that character narration involves dual communications, one between the character and the narratee, and the other between the implied author and the authorial reader.[1] As the female protagonists in *Kissing the Witch* are all character narrators, Phelan's theory of character narration alerts us to the dual communications that occur in these tales, that is, while these character narrators communicate their perspectives to their listeners, the implied Donoghue communicates her perspective to her implied reader. Therefore, what does she intend to achieve by telling these female characters' stories?

1 James Phelan, *Living to Tell about It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005) 7.

Through telling "The Tale of the Rose" Donoghue exposes to us readers the patriarchal mechanism of the source text and the significance of revising it. By showing that the Beauty figure makes recurrent references to the classical version and activates its script when imagining the beast's appearance and nature, Donoghue alerts us to the canonical tale's strong impact on the protagonist and on us as well. We tend to associate the protagonist's life with the classical tale. Despite the fact that the previous tales all have important female characters, we have not expected the beast to be a woman, not to mention her resemblance to Snow White. Later, in the next tale that the beast tells, we learn that she is Snow White herself! In this way we are alerted to the passive role imposed upon the Beauty figure and the alternative paths that she can take. Actually, by choosing to take her own path, the Beauty figure ends up getting the red rose that she has been wishing to possess. The red rose is actually Snow White. The Beauty figure's final revelation of her knowledge of the beast figure greatly reduces the distance between her and the reader and makes the reader identify with her emotionally. Furthermore, her courageousness and intelligence results in the reader's identification with her ethically. Likewise, by letting the Snow White figure tell about her eventual realization of the falsehood of the prevalent views on stepmothers in "The Tale of the Apple," Donoghue questions the stereotypical images that classic fairy tales often construct and reinforce. The reader thus keeps a substantial distance from the popular tale, sympathizes with the persecuted Snow White figure, and identifies with Donoghue's re-telling.

In fact, following the revisionist treatment of popular fairy tales since the 1970s, Donoghue discloses the phallocentric and heteronormative nature of these classical tales in each of her rewrites. But she does not create female figures who have similar personalities and desires. Each is distinct and unique in her own way. As Orme notes, her female characters are varied and have varied desires which "include same-sex sexual desire between women, heterosexual desire of women for men, desires for autonomy and freedom, and desires for individual subjectivity, for belonging, and for knowledge" (Orme 117). In addition, by letting these female figures tell and share their stories with each other Donoghue actually creates a female community whose discrete voices constitute a distinctive communal voice, which, according to Susan Lanser, is "articulate either a collective voice or a collective of voices that share narrative authority" (Lanser 21). This communal voice can be regarded as a collective voice, as these female figures all speak around the same topic, that is, their relations with classic fairy tales and their efforts to free themselves from the constraints and negative influence of these tales. The communal voice can also be understood as a collective of voices that share narrative

authority, because these female characters all have the desire and the chance to tell their stories. And as we become more and more engaged in their stories in our reading process, we develop affinity with this communal voice.

The second half of the 20th century witnessed an upsurge in fairy tale rewriting so that we are not unfamiliar with revisionist fairy tales. Abigail L. Palko points out that Donoghue is influenced by the feminist fairy tales created and published in the 1980s. Attic Press, Ireland's oldest feminist publishing house, published a series of feminist revisions of fairy tales and "these stories serve as campy predecessors to Donoghue's work".(Palko 934). Martin also holds the view that Donoghue positions her tales as reactions to authoritative narratives, and that she interacts with other revisionist fairy tales writers, especially Anne Sexton and Olga Broumas.

The title of Donoghue's book "Kissing the Witch" indicates the book's relations with folktale, fairy tale or fantasy as the witch figure tends to appear in all these genres, while the subtitle "Old Tales in New Skins" narrows the scope of genre to a revision of folk tales or fairy tales. Martin believes that the imagery of old tales and new skins suggests that "old tales expand like young yeasty wines, and thus need new skins or retellings that can expand with them in an interactive dynamic" (Martin 14). The employment of first-person female character narration in each tale gives these tales an idiosyncratic feature of oral folk tales which are usually told by women, especially old women. As Angela Carter notes, "...there exists a European convention of an archetypal female storyteller, 'Mother Goose' in English, 'Ma Mere L'Oie' in French, an old woman sitting by the fireside, spinning..." (Carter x). These female tellers of oral folk tales often pass on stories of fun and wisdom. Likewise, the few lines in dialogic form placed between two adjacent tales in *Kissing the Witch* highlight the eagerness of two female storytellers to learn more about each other. Rather than serving as warnings for the reader as Perrault's morals often do, these few lines show the teller's curiosity about another female figure and at the same time lead to this female figure's story. By engaging in impassioned exchange of their own life stories, Donoghue's female tellers pass on their wisdom to each other and to the general reader as well. Furthermore, the distinct female voices in *Kissing the Witch* evoke the fairy tales written by women writers since the seventeenth century, especially those told and written by French noble women in their salons in the late seventeenth century. It is these French female writers who invented the term "fairy tale".[1] The majority of these women writers wrote to voice their discontent with the dominant ideologies of their time

1 Danielle M. Roemer, and Cristina Bacchilega, eds. *Angela Carter and the Fairy Tale* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998) 94.

and envision a better future for themselves. Likewise, the female characters in *Kissing the Witch* voice their various desires, ambitions, regrets and concerns in postmodern era. The fact that many of the tales deal with the female character's awareness of their homosexual orientation reflects Donoghue's deep concern over the well-being of lesbians in Ireland.[1]

The reciprocal effect of telling and listening is probably best demonstrated in the dialogue between the Witch figure and the girl who also comes to her for help after her parents do, in the last tale "The Tale of the Kiss," the only tale that does not allude to any specific classic tale. The two-page long dialogue is worth a close examination, and here is the first half of the dialogue:

> You're not child enough for your mother nor woman enough for your father. You don't work or play or think as they would have you work and play and think.
>
> She smiled at me with teeth like quartz.
>
> What are you good at?
>
> I don't know yet, said the girl, staring into the fire. Faint steam was rising from her.
>
> What is it you want?
>
> Nothing, she said, half laughing.
>
> There is no creature under the sky that does not want, I told her severely.
>
> Only what I've got, then, she said.
>
> That's lucky.
>
> And time to think about what I want next.
>
> I nodded judiciously.
>
> And time to just think.
>
> There's plenty of that up here, I remarked.
>
> She stared around the cave. There must be all the time in the world here, she said wonderingly.
>
> My heart was beginning to thud. (Donoghue 220-221)

The dialogue shows that by engaging in exchange of ideas and thoughts, both the Witch figure and the girl come to a better understanding of themselves. The former finds that the girl is the right person for her, while the latter learns that she is indeed different from the image that her parents and the society at large strive to construct

1 Stacia Bensyl. "Swings and Roundabouts: An Interview with Emma Donoghue." *Irish Studies Review*, 8.1 (2000). 76.

for her. Furthermore, the girl also plays the role of the general reader, if we take into consideration the overall narrative structure of each tale, that is, the narratee/listener of the tale becomes the teller of the following tale. Since "The Tale of the Witch" is the last tale of the story sequence, it is the general reader that is expected to tell the next tale. Furthermore, the fact that the character narrators in the story sequence are not only story tellers and listeners but also re-tellers of classical fairy tales and re-creators of their own stories reminds the reader of the importance of having critical dialogues with canonized tales as well as the significance of re-telling. It also demonstrates the validity of fairy tale as a genre. Thus Donoghue makes the reader actively participate in story reading and interpretation.

Conclusion

Kissing the Witch creates thirteen distinct tales about thirteen familiar yet unfamiliar female figures, who are different in age, personality, social class, sexual orientation, ambitions and so on. By letting these girls and women tell their own stories, Donoghue creates the impression that we are listening to folk tales who have females as tellers. By arranging these female figures to function both as the teller and the listener, she provides an opportunity for these fairy-tale characters to engage in dialogue, which results in their strong bond. In so doing Donoghue brings about new perspectives on the fairy tale and society.

By rewriting classic fairy tales, Donoghue invites us to reflect upon their nature and function. Jack Zipes points out the pedagogic nature of Perrault's tales,[1] and Maria Tatar convincingly argues that the Grimm brothers' tales are "manual of manners" for children (Tatar xi). By ripping off the old skins of the classic tales and giving them new skins, Donoghue arouses our awareness of the positive potential of the fairy tale to address current social problems. Furthermore, the fact that many of the fairy-tale figures in *Kissing the Witch* are lesbians shows Donoghue's concern about lesbians' situation in the late 20th century. In a word, by demonstrating the magical power of telling and re-telling, Donoghue proves the vitality and validity of fairy tale as a genre.

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1 Jack Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales*,1979 (New York: Routledge, 1992) 25.

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