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# *Of Bees, Fairies, and Women: Lisa Carey's Feminist and Parodical Rewriting of Tradition in The Stolen Child (2017)*

Audrey Robitaillié

**Abstract:** *This article examines Lisa Carey's recent novel, which offers a rewriting of both folkloric and Yeatsian traditions. The author reuses fairy beliefs, bee folklore, and religious traditions around Saint Brigid and Saint Gobnait, in contrast with the demands of modern life, to illustrate the antagonistic pulls on the protagonists. Through this rewriting of Irish folklore, she offers a feminist parody of tradition, in Linda Hutcheon's sense of the word. The North American writer reuses Irish fairy beliefs to question the representation of motherhood through her character of Emer, and rewrites the legend of Saint Brigid, to turn her into a feminist model for the female protagonists.*

**Keywords:** *Irish folklore; contemporary literature; parody; feminism; motherhood; fairies; changeling; Brigid.*

## Introduction

Lisa Carey's portrayal of the imaginary St Brigid's island in her novel *The Stolen Child* (2017)<sup>1</sup> depicts a rural community where traditions are anchored deep and beliefs in the supernatural are myriad. This remote location, off the west coast of Ireland, sees the everyday toils of sisters Emer and Rose. When a North American relative, Brigid, returns to the island, the community is shaken in its traditions and beliefs, all the more so that there are also hotly-debated talks of evacuation of the island.

The author reuses beliefs in the fairies, and the Otherworld, folklore around bees, and religious traditions linked to Saint Brigid,<sup>2</sup> and her lesser-known counterpart Saint Gobnait, in contrast with the demands of modern life, to illustrate the antagonistic pulls on the protagonists. Through this rewriting of Irish folklore, Carey offers a feminist parody of tradition, in Linda Hutcheon's sense of the word.

Parody, "one of the many forms of intertextual allusions out which texts are produced" (Dentith 6), is at the core of the reuse of tradition witnessed in Carey's *The Stolen Child*. The process has been analysed in detail by the Canadian literary theorist Linda Hutcheon, who famously sees it as "a form of repetition with ironic critical distance, marking off difference rather than similarity" (2000, xii). Through parody, a text is taken up, replicated, and reinterpreted. This latter step in the process brings a challenge to the original work and indicates difference from it. Andy Warhol's *Marilyn Diptych* (1962) is a well-known example of parody: in reproducing the portrait of Marilyn Monroe from a film poster in brightly-coloured and monochrome juxtaposed frames, the artist introduces a distance from the original visual

oeuvre that signals its critique, warning the observer of the media's overwhelming grip on society and reminding them of their mortality (Tate Gallery). Yet, Hutcheon notes the "central paradox of parody": "In imitating, even with critical difference, parody reinforces" (2000, 26). Warhol's use of Marilyn's image, even as it denounces the cult of celebrity, also acknowledges her aura. Carey's novel similarly both takes up Irish folk beliefs, and thus further asserts their influence on contemporary literature, and challenges them by instilling a feminist twist that undermines the historical and social context out of which they emerged.

Hutcheon indeed recognizes that the parodical process is one used by "minorities" to "dismantle" and weaken the established norm (2004; 10). Although she does not dwell on feminist uses of parody, the Canadian theorist nonetheless remarks that, unlike the general postmodern trend, wallowing in its parodical paradoxes, feminist, as well as postcolonial, parodical discourses were meant more as challenging and vindicating tools than as marks of reverence for influential precursors (2004; 8-9). Quoting Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Hutcheon writes that "Much female writing today, aiming as it does to be both revisionary and revolutionary, is 'parodic, duplicitous, extraordinarily sophisticated'" (2000; 46). This feminist stance is in fact the one taken by Carey in her rewriting of Irish tradition in *The Stolen Child*.

The female author inscribes the feminine figures of Rose and Emer into an insular landscape of traditions at the start of the book, to eventually turn them into feminist forces through the intervention of Brigid, the evolution of the protagonists mirroring the parodical process at work. The distinction between female, feminist, and feminine has been much debated; the definitions of the terms used here follow those detailed by Toril Moi, who sees the feminine as "marginalized" by the ruling order, and the feminist as opposing this patriarchal and sexist system (220).

Lisa Carey reuses Irish fairy beliefs to question the representation of motherhood through the character of Emer. Yet the latter does not become an unambiguous feminist figure, as she is raped by her brother-in-law, a trauma evoked through the folklore of changelings. The author also rewrites the religious tradition of Saint Brigid, merging it with that of Saint Gobnait, to turn them into feminist models for the female protagonists.

## Fairy beliefs and motherhood

Lisa Carey in *The Stolen Child* makes use of the Irish folk beliefs in the fairies and the Otherworld. These supernatural beings were thought to live alongside humans, yet invisible to them. Benevolent when they were being treated respectfully, the fairies could also be vengeful to those who disregarded them (motif ATU F361 "Fairy's Revenge"). The tradition of throwing the dirty feet water to have the house ready at night for fairy visitors (Ó Súilleabháin 463), for instance, is evoked in the novel, and so is the oft-referred-to story of the girl who danced her toes off with the fairies (243), which W.B. Yeats mentions in his *Irish Fairy Tales*.<sup>3</sup> The character Brigid recalls the belief in the fairy stroke (264): people or cattle would be struck with a sudden, inexplicable affliction that could only be the work of spiteful fairies (Jenkins 316). Niall, Emer's son, mentions the cries of the corncrakes, "voices of fairies that have failed in their mischief" (94), migratory birds that have a supernatural connection because of their mysterious appearance and disappearance (Mac Coitir 143). By taking up the Irish fairy tradition, Carey thus parodies it and effects a "reinscription of [its] authority" in Irish culture

and literature. But she also uses parody's "transgressing impulse" (Hutcheon 2000, xvii) by introducing a feminist questioning on motherhood in her fiction.

The depiction of Emer's motherhood is articulated around her inextinguishable fear to lose her only son Niall to the fairies (134). The young woman is marked by what she sees as encounters with the fairies: an otherworldly woman likened to Saint Brigid, whom she met when she was a five-year-old child (40-41), a fairy hand appearing as she is working in the bog two years later (44-45), and a swarm of bees, whom she views as agents of the Otherworld (46-47) and led to the loss of one of her eyes, as well as a fairy midwife who visits her after Niall's birth (91). She thus lives in terror that her son will also be abducted. Every illness of the boy is taken by his mother as a dark omen of the fairies' views on him (260). The folk belief that fairies are keen to take away humans to the Otherworld, especially children and particularly boys, has been well spread throughout Ireland (Mac Philib 131). The novel recognizes this early on (92), since Emer's fear provides a tense leitmotiv, unifying the narrative.

The "stolen child" of the title refers thus first to Emer and then to her son Niall. The title is obviously evocative of W. B. Yeats's iconic poem, "The Stolen Child" from *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems*, and which is quoted in the epigraph. Parodying the great figure of Irish literature, Carey rewrites the stolen child motif through her narrative told from the point of view of those who are left behind, not from the fairies' perspective as Yeats's does. Carey's move can be read as a feminist rewriting of the Yeatsian poem, since she adds her own female voice to the literary tradition around stolen children by depicting a mother's anxiety over this aspect of fairy belief. The focus is drawn on to the maternal perspective, rather than on the fairies' fantastical realm. Carey emphasises the feminine voice of the mother, victim of the supernatural forces and their interest in her son.

Niall's "fairy eyes" are often alluded to (14), as well as his "absences" whenever the fairies are mentioned around him (19), owing, according to Emer, to the dark powers that hovered over Niall's cradle at birth (128). His "otherworldly" characteristics (102) implicitly stem from the fact that he was born on the first of May (88): this is the day of the Irish festival of Bealtaine, during which supernatural happenings were legion in folk tradition. Persons or animals born on that day were supposed to have supernatural abilities (Ó Súilleabháin 334).

When the boy suffers from appendicitis and the doctors are unable to come to the island because of a storm, Emer realizes that she had been so afraid of Niall being taken by the fairies that she forgot he could die too (299). After his tragic death, Emer stays awake at night, not giving up on his return (301): she refuses to believe that he is dead, and thinks that he has been taken by the fairies and that he will return at night (290). Many folk tales recount how abducted women were returned to their husbands who were brave enough to catch them as they were riding by on fairy horses at night after the funeral (Ó Súilleabháin 474).

Emer then is presented as *mater dolorosa*, to reuse the image called upon by Julia Kristeva in her article on motherhood: "The Mater dolorosa knows no male body except that of her dead son, and her only pathos (which is sharply distinguished from the sweet and somewhat absent serenity of the lactating Madonnas) comes from the tears she sheds over a corpse" (Kristeva 144). Her despair at Niall's passing, manifested through her screams and her attempts to revive him, is palpable: "She is shaking his body, insisting he answer her" (290), in front of a rural community watching aghast. Carey depicts Emer as a Gaelic *pietà*, cradling her dead son, in a way that only contrasts with her nursing sister because Rose's children are not in

fatal danger.

The portrayal of Emer throughout the novel, and at its climax with Niall's death, tends to offer a feminine picture of the female character: that of the traditional Gaelic woman as mother, whose life at home revolves around the male presences in her life. This corresponds to what Kristeva has noted: "we live in a civilization in which the consecrated (religious or secular) representation of femininity is subsumed under maternity" (Kristeva 133). The insular community's conception of the role of women indeed corresponds to that described by Kristeva. Emer is expected to help Brigid clean the house just like the men are in charge of the boats and unloading the deliveries from the mainland (17). Emer's life is centred around the home and the men who live in it. Her feminine role is tied to her maternal duties.

Emer's depiction as a Marian figure is reinforced by the fact that she refuses to have any sexual relationships with her alcoholic husband, Patch (92): she acts as a virgin mother to Niall (Kristeva 136). Her idea of motherhood comes in opposition to her sister Rose's, whose fertility is attested by her continuous sets of twins, and who lets her children run free, mostly because she cannot keep an eye on all of them while nursing babies (34). Even though she first seems to conform to the religion-based sexist representation of women as mothers, Emer challenges the traditional representation of motherhood embodied by Rose. Her status as mother does not make her a reactionary woman, because she decides her own destiny by refusing to lie with her husband anymore. By shunning Patch, Emer reinforces her status of independent woman, while at the same time conforming to the religious stance on the role of women through this Marian portrayal. Carey writes out a parody of the Gaelic female figure through her paradoxical character of Emer.

Emer further rejects the traditional expectations of Gaelic women by having an affair with Brigid. The image of the virginal mother is subverted by the North American character, who "can lift a boat as well as any man" (216), and who thus turns her counterpart into a feminist figure, embodying what Kristeva calls "herethics" (Schippers 91-92): the Marian character turns lesbian after Brigid's arrival. From female subsumed to the male dominance in her island community, Emer becomes a virginal figure. She later abandons this religious cloak of the Marian figure, after her encounter with Brigid, to take full control over her destiny. She is indeed one of the few on the island to want an evacuation: she believes that the further away from the island she goes, the lesser the fairy threat to Niall becomes (49; 93). Carey here subverts the tradition that would see Emer as a maternal, tearful figure, prey to the angst caused by the fairy threat: she turns Emer, even momentarily (since the lesbian love affair does not last), into a feminist protagonist, in place of the marginalized, feminine character she initially was.

## **The changeling paradox**

Emer's feminist status is nonetheless ambiguous. Her depiction reverts to that of a feminine character when she is victim of a rape. Stuck on St Brigid with a sick Niall and his uncle Austin, Rose's husband, while the rest of the islanders are gone to mass on the neighbouring island, Emer is assaulted by her own brother-in-law and childhood crush, Austin.

The narrative then, told in the third person from Emer's point of view, explains that the *poitín* has turned Austin into a changeling (186), hence the sexual abuse Emer is victim of. The imagery of the changeling recurs in connection to Austin's rape of Emer, since, as Niall witnesses the assault, he wonders whether Austin is a changeling then (188), and Emer further tries to make sense of the crime by saying that Austin was under a fairy stroke (193). She subsequently falls pregnant and worries that the baby she is expecting is from the fairies and not Austin (205-206).

Changeling folklore is attested all over Ireland. As fairies were thought to abduct humans to their realm, they were often believed to leave a substitute to replace the stolen person. The changeling, both similar enough to the abductee to mislead the family for days, weeks, and even years, and different enough that the expert eye notices the change, is an ambivalent folk figure, as discussed by Adam Lawrence in his study of changelings in science-fiction (98). Carey's use of changeling folklore to express the characters' being at loss when it comes to explaining the rape echoes what Angela Bourke saw as one of the uses of fairy traditions. She argues that these beliefs are a way to maintain a necessary balance in society: "it permits face-saving lies to be told, and disturbing narratives to be safely detoured into fiction if children are found to be listening, or if the complex web of family relationships means that someone may take offence, or threaten retaliation". As she further explains, "attributing tragic events or criminal actions to the fairies could work as a face-saving mechanism which would allow ordinary, indispensable social interaction to proceed, something that could not be achieved through accusation and confrontation" (37; 183).

Emer's belief, or her wanting to believe, that Austin was under a fairy stroke when he raped her exonerates him by putting the blame on the fairies. Since he is her sister's husband, Niall's uncle, and her husband's brother, this belief allows the family to continue to function as a social unit. The many ties woven between Emer and Austin because of family connections prevent her from acknowledging the rape in any other way than as a fairy assault if she is to maintain the status quo within her tightly-knit community: "Emer realises how impossible that will be, to ever uncoil the fairy threat from the human mistake" (201). Due to the weight of social and familial ties, the female protagonist thus becomes once again subjected to male violence, a feminine figure, in opposition to the feminist stance she took with her own husband, Patch, Austin's brother.

This paradox of the feminist/feminine Emer is mirrored in the "two voices" of the narrative process at work, parody (Hutcheon 2000; xiv). Like the two-faced changeling, both human and fairy, "Parody is fundamentally double and divided, its ambivalence stems from the dual drives of conservative and revolutionary forces that are inherent in its nature as authorized transgression" (Hutcheon 2000; 26). This duality of the parodical process is also echoed in the figure of the changeling that Emer calls upon to make sense of the rape. The changeling is a creature that is both similar and different, same and other. Brigid's mother, Nuala, an islander herself, is portrayed telling a story of two children: one of them is a changeling but it is impossible to tell which one is which, so the family cannot know which one to get rid of (265).

Both Nuala and, later, her daughter Brigid are accused of being changelings, because of the power in their hands, which Brigid uses in her job as midwife. The magical touch in their hands marks them as different from the rest of the islanders. Nuala was burnt as a

changeling by the men of the island (280), as she was believed to be a changeling's daughter. She tells her own child, Brigid, stories of changelings reminiscent of her own experience (59-61). Brigid is then paralleled with her mother (278), when Emer accuses her of being a changeling (269), this allegation working as an act of revenge for ending their relationship. The then antagonistic situation between the two women exposes Brigid's depiction as both saint and changeling, depending on the circumstances (274).

Emer, who was presented as victim when she was raped by a drunk/changeling Austin, becomes the assailant when she initiates the community's attack on Brigid, accusing her of being a changeling (269). Like the parodical process at work in the narrative which recounts their story, the characters are "overtly hybrid and double-voiced" (Hutcheon 2000, 28). The changelings in the novel are both the victims and the attackers, their common point being that the community recognizes the "difference or otherness within the subject" (Schipers 89) and they end up expelled from the island through death, evacuation, or escape.

To take up Julia Kristeva's terms, the changeling represents the "abject other" to the insular community of St Brigid. Birgit Schippers remarks on the ambivalence of the figure of the abject and reminds us of Kristeva's understanding of the term: "To emphasise the ambiguity of abjection, Kristeva defines abjection as what 'disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite'" (Schipers 4). Emer can be read as an abject other because she does not respect the rules of the religious, reactionary society she lives in when she has a love affair with Brigid, who is later accused of being a changeling. Brigid is equally seen as an abject other because of her lesbian inclinations, but also because she is a North American immigrant to the island, and, what is more, a single, childless middle-aged woman, which contrasts with the social culture on St Brigid. As for Austin, he is an abject other when he rapes Emer, who thinks he is a changeling then. When Austin is a changeling, he is an offender, a violent attacker, an abject other; yet when Brigid or her mother Nuala are accused of being changelings, they are victims of the islanders' assaults. Changeling and abject other are thus ambivalent and ambiguous qualifiers because they apply to both victims and their assailants.

The condition of abject other is tied to motherhood. According to Kristeva: "the relation to abjection is finally rooted in the combat that every human being carries on with the mother. For in order to become autonomous, it is necessary that one cut the instinctual dyad of the mother and the child and that one become something other" (Schipers 50). While for Kristeva, women are considered the abject other in a patriarchal society, the figure of abjection and otherness takes various shapes in the novel, through Emer, Brigid, and Austin. The latter's sexual predatory behaviour is imposed on an unconventional mother (for the island community) in front of her child. Brigid's plight when faced with the islanders' fairy beliefs is suffered as she is miraculously pregnant. The assaults on maternal figures are either conducted by abject others or because they are seen as abject others, who have transgressed the norms and social order of the island. In each case, the abject other is presented as a changeling, a fairy creature who has crossed the borders of the Otherworld.

The parodical process, which asserts the importance of fairy beliefs in Irish culture and literature even as it subverts it by adding a feminist questioning on the notion of otherness, mirrors the representations of the character of Emer, both victim and attacker. The figure of the changeling, called upon when Emer is raped and the pregnant Brigid assaulted, is used to

set the limits of the insular community's unspoken rules. As Angela Bourke writes, "these stories are important components of child-rearing practice, establishing the boundaries of normal, acceptable behaviour, and spelling out the ways in which an individual who breaches them may forfeit his or her position" (30). In *The Stolen Child*, parody reinstates the significance of fairy beliefs in Irish culture and communities.

## **Brigid, Gobnait, and the feminists**

Lisa Carey rewrites the folk figures of Irish tradition, according to the principles of parody, which "manages to inscribe continuity while permitting critical distance and change" (Hutcheon 2000, 102). Not content with subverting fairy and changeling beliefs, the author challenges the traditional view of religious characters such as Saint Brigid and Saint Gobnait.

Saint Brigid, after whom both the island and one of the protagonists are named, is mentioned right at the beginning of the novel. Rose believes in Saint Brigid's power to protect houses, , reciting lines from what the islanders call "the incantation of Saint Brigid" (6) that derives directly from "The Genealogy of Bride", found in the Highlands and islands of Scotland according to Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica* (175). The insular residents in the novel also recount stories about the holy figure (93). Saint Brigid's well is the heart of the island, a tightly-guarded secret among the community, only accessible down the side of the cliff in a hidden cave (158). This is reminiscent of an actual pilgrimage site in Co. Clare, where the holy well to Saint Brigid sits underneath the hill, which is topped by a graveyard (Bitel 2009; xi).

The novel picks up the religious legends about Saint Brigid's birth: she was born on the threshold, neither inside nor outside, an apt liminal image which further echoes the parodical process through which Carey rewrites the saint's legend. The island women repeatedly mention the fire that burns in their hearths as originating from the very flames that the saint kept alive (129). Recalling the fire imagery linked to both Niall and Emer (7; 97), the historical figure of Saint Brigid is indeed associated with fire, according to Giraldus Cambrensis who, in 1184, reported an "inextinguishable fire" at her monastery in Kildare, near which no men were allowed (MacKillop). The book also alludes to Brigid's pagan origins, when Rose's eldest daughter Fiona claims that Brigid was actually a fairy queen (129), and when an islander mentions the druid Brigid keening (211). The goddess Brigid was in fact said to be a daughter of the Dagda, the Irish god of abundance, and the creator of the *caoineadh*, keening (Bitel 2002; 224). She is sometimes seen as a form of sun goddess (Condren 66), a function that may connect her pagan representation to the customs related to Saint Brigid's fire. She is thus presented as an ambivalent force, since she is both a Christian saint and a pagan goddess, which echoes both the changeling that Emer despises and the double-faced parodical process ongoing throughout the novel. Since Brigid is also the name of the main protagonist of the book, Carey's triple figure parallels the trio of sister goddesses named Brigid, "adored by poets, smiths, and leeches" (Sjoestedt 25). The triptych of pagan goddess, saint, and human character interestingly compares to the threesome of the human abductee, in opposition to the fairy substitute, both merging into the changeling.

Lisa Bitel writes that Brigid's disciples "purposely cast Brigit as a goddess-heroine who left no traces of her own physicality but controlled her physical environment like a territorial goddess from the ancient past" (Bitel 2002; 210). Carey takes up this figure of Brigid, keeping



in line with most of her traits as they are presented in the legends. However, her questionings around maternity are also visible in her retelling of the Brigid narrative in *The Stolen Child*. The earthly Brigid, protagonist of the novel, has come to the island in the hope of finding the holy well that will make her miraculously pregnant. She is so desperate for motherhood that she even considers asking for a changeling child with “fire in their eyes” or to be stolen in order not to be alone (71). Brigid is the patron saint of women in childbirth, hence the character’s move to the island. Marie-Louise Sjoestedt explains: “being a mother-goddess, she watches over childbirth, and modern folklore makes her midwife of the Blessed Virgin” (25), the story of how Brigid became the “aid-woman” of the mother of Christ being recounted for instance in *Carmina Gadelica* (165-166). In the novel, the women describe to the North American newcomer the female community that her namesake led on the island: in their secluded retreat, the nuns of Saint Brigid welcomed pregnant girls and helped them give birth to children they all took care of (129). The holy figure is thus presented both as a mother superior for her religious community and as a substitute mother for the troubled girls who came to the island to give birth. The historical Brigid was in fact sometimes referred to as the “Mary of the Gael”, and Dorothy Bray refers to her as “an exemplary virgin saint” (Bray 209; 211). The saintly character thus echoes the Marian characteristics of Emer, mentioned earlier.

Brigid’s motherly characteristics and her religious ambivalence make her a feminist role model. She is a leader, setting up and managing a community of nuns on a secluded island, and, according to the islanders in the novel, even “ordained as a bishop” (8). She asserts her feminist influence by taking the place of the male religious leader, so that the book’s Saint Brigid matches the features of the historical one as Bray describes her: “Saint Brigit stands as the archetype of the female religious leader and saint” (209). Yet, Lisa Bitel remarks that the earliest account of Saint Brigid by Cogitosus depicts her as tactically submissive: “Brigit obeyed God and men, and thus men, women, animals, and even the forces of nature obeyed the saint” (2002, 215). Whereas the medieval lives of the saint portray a Brigid under the authority of Saint Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland is never mentioned in *The Stolen Child*. Carey chooses to emphasise Brigid’s role as female leader in the novel.

Like Emer, she is determined to keep away from men. Bray writes: “Saint Brigit’s beauty is never denied, but when her half-brothers mock her for refusing to marry, she plucks out her own eye. Her disfigurement, a hag-like one, thus spoils her chances of marriage and demonstrates her determination to enter the church” (213). Her deformation further recalls Emer’s own scar. Both women’s strong will are akin: “They say Saint Brigid pulled her own eye out, to repel a man sizing her up for a wife. [...] The fairies took Emer’s eye, but the one they left suggests she is capable of doing something similar” (12). The reluctance to rely on men that is portrayed in the Saint Brigid of *The Stolen Child* is also to be understood through the lesbian undertones among the nun community in the novel. The islanders mention Brigid’s “soul friend” Darladuach, whose child was raised by both women, and who lay by Brigid’s side when the saint died (129). The novel thus takes up an aspect of the saint’s life mentioned in her hagiographies: her close bond with Dar Lugdach, who became abbess of Kildare after the saint’s death. This has been pointed out by some as a sign of the lesbian relationship between Brigid and her follower (Beresford Ellis 149). These homosexual allusions are paralleled by Emer and Brigid’s love affair in the novel. The multiple readings of the figure of Brigid in *The Stolen Child* reinforce Kristeva’s claim of the singularity and plurality of women (Schippers 37):

Brigid is all of these women at once, while each of these versions of Brigid is unique and specific in their own ways. Brigid is thus both a feminine, religious figure exiled on an isolated island at the mercy of the weather and of God, and a feminist, lesbian leader helping young mothers in an island community of women, which echoes the isle of Lesbos.

This equivocality of Brigid further mirrors the uncertainty faced by Rose, Emer, and Brigid as they are about to be evacuated from the island. The difficulties faced by these mothers who eventually have to leave their homes on the island of St Brigid, unlike the neighbouring community on Inis Murúch, echo the troubled mother/daughter relationships portrayed in one of Carey's previous novels, *The Mermaids Singing*, taking place on a certain... Inis Murúch. The women of the island have to be evacuated at the end of their story by the men of the neighbouring islands and the mainland, because they have not managed to survive on the island without the men providing the sustenance from the sea and the fields, while they tend to the animals, the homes and the children. This would represent the fall of the feminist community, becoming feminine again, giving in to the patriarchal system, and thus suggesting an underachievement. Yet the novel does not finish on such a pessimistic note: the end of the community's story is in fact offered right at the beginning of the narrative, in the very first sentence of the prologue (3-9). Carey rather chooses to end *The Stolen Child* with the magical realist return of Niall, without hardly a mention of the evacuation. She thus subverts the return to feminine figures that the evacuation implies. The rebirth of Niall out of Brigid's caul in fact bolsters Emer's unconventional representation of motherhood: she was right all along. This hopeful ending counteracts the pessimistic prologue and supports a feminist reading of Carey's characters.

In addition, the imagery of bees is prominent in the novel, not least on the cover of the book. Emer recalls being stolen by the bees when she was a young child (46-47), and tells Brigid that the bees/fairies took her eye (109), leaving her one-eyed. When Brigid brings bees from the mainland to set up a hive in her garden, Emer is understandably terrified (103). Her fears are realized when Niall is attacked by bees (108). The insects are connected with the supernatural in Irish folklore: a swarm of bees is considered to bring luck, for example.<sup>4</sup> Bees are easily offended if not told of family affairs, hence the custom of "telling the bees" about a death, in much the same way that the fairies get offended if their tree is cut down, or if their path is blocked, for instance (Chaomhánach 3). Hilda Ransome notes that bees are "creatures of special sanctity" (19). Eimear Chaomhánach reports the following conversation on the topic: "What are these? He answered her with some surprise, 'Bees'. 'No', she replied, 'we only call them so, they are fairies, or rather they are souls. If you had watched them as I have, you would not say that they were mere insects...'" (10).

The supernatural aura of bees is connected to that of their patron saint, Gobnait. The Irish holy figure hails from Ballyvourney, Co. Cork (Chaomhánach 6). According to the Diocese of Kerry, Saint Gobnait is much revered in Kerry, Cork and the Aran Islands, in particular on Inis Oírr,<sup>5</sup> which parallels the fictional Saint Brigid's island of the novel. Eimear Chaomhánach remarks that "Bees are seen to share much of the magical ability possessed by the Saints who acted as their patrons" (10). Séamas Ó Catháin in fact argues that Gobnait is but one persona of Saint Brigid herself (57-58). In the novel, Brigid explains to Niall how the hive functions: "it's the women who run the bee world" (105). Later on, after the young men of the island have all drowned during a storm, Brigid makes a comment about the bees that sounds

like an unconscious comparison between bees and islanders: “They sent the drones out to die and the women will stay hunkered down until spring” (225). The imagery of the bees reinforces the feminist take on the legend of Saint Brigid in Carey’s novel: similarly to the monastic community on the island, the apiarian society is ruled by females. Carey thus further inscribes her feminist agenda into *The Stolen Child* through her depiction of Saint Brigid. Her multifaceted characters act as vehicles for her parodical strategy. As Hutcheon argues, “parody, by its very doubled structure, is very much an inscription of the past in the present, and it is for that reason that it can be said to embody and bring to life actual historical tensions” (2000; xii). Through this parodical novel, Carey rewrites the Irish traditions and illustrates the social tensions linked to women’s rights.

## Conclusion

In this novel, Lisa Carey offers a feminist parody of Irish folk traditions. She takes up fairy lore to describe Emer’s motherly worry about her only son, thus introducing a questioning on maternity. The unconventional mother figures that Emer and Brigid represent come under attack in the course of the narrative, where changeling stories are evoked to make sense of the violence taking place on the island. The changeling figure is linked to both victim and attacker, in an ambivalent move that recalls the parodical rewriting. The author picks up the legend of Saint Brigid and emphasizes its feminist aspects to take an anti-patriarchal stance.

In doing so, Carey fulfils Hutcheon’s words on the process at work in the novel: “Parody today is endowed with the power to renew. It needs not do so, but it can” (2000; 115). In *The Stolen Child*, the author renews the Irish tradition it takes up by infusing a feminist flavour to Irish folklore through her depiction of Emer and Brigid. The feminist twist and contradicting pulls endured by the protagonists illustrate their struggles. The narrative mode of parody serves to mirror their conflicted states, as they face challenges that change their definitions of home.

## Notes

- 1 Lisa Carey, *The Stolen Child* (London: Weinfeld & Nicolson, 2017). All subsequent quotations from the novel are taken from this edition and indicated in brackets.
- 2 There are several spellings of the figure’s name, from Brigid and Brigit, to Bríd in Irish, and many others depending on the language and the period. The spelling used by Lisa Carey in her novel is the one used throughout this paper (Charles-Edwards).
- 3 William Butler Yeats, *Irish Fairy Tales* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1892), 225. This is also recounted in a narrative from the Schools’ Collection in the National Folklore Collection in Dublin: “The Woman Who Was Stolen by the Fairies” (NFCS 172: 400) by Dominick Henry, collected by Mary Henry in Cloondrihara, Co. Sligo.
- 4 National Folklore Collection, University College Dublin: Schools’ Collection, Volume 0364, page 275 (informant Eileen O’Leary, Gortnagross, Co. Cork).
- 5 <http://www.dioceseofkerry.ie/our-diocese/genealogy/saints/st-gobnait/>

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