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**Witch, Fairy, Guilty: An Analysis of Women's  
Roles in Irish Changeling Tales**

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## 1. Abstracts.

### 1.1. Abstract.

In the folklore of Ireland, the changeling stands out as the most representative and iconic figure in popular tales. This creature, the fairy substitute of a kidnapped person, has been theorized to have emerged due to high infant mortality rates and early explanations of disability. Furthermore, far from staying in the realm of fairy tales and fiction, the changeling has real-world counterparts and consequences that are well attested in the historical record. As such, it has become one of the most written-about myths. However, and despite extensive analysis performed on such tales, little attention has been paid to the women in these: always present, yet rarely visible. In order to understand the roles played by women in changeling folktales and in folklore at large, an analysis has been performed of a series of texts featuring these creatures with the objective to better comprehend the manner in which folklore reflects the social realities and idiosyncrasies of Ireland.

Keywords: Changeling, Folklore, Fairy tales, Women's roles, Ireland, Comparative analysis

### 1.2. Resumen.

En el folklore de Irlanda, el *changeling* o niño cambiado destaca como la figura más representativa e icónica en los cuentos populares. Esta criatura, un hada sustituta de una persona secuestrada, emergió, se teoriza, debido a altas tasas de mortalidad infantil y a explicaciones tempranas de la discapacidad. No obstante, lejos de permanecer en el ámbito de los cuentos de hadas y la ficción, los niños cambiados tienen equivalentes y consecuencias en la vida real que están ampliamente documentadas en registros históricos. Por tanto, se ha convertido en uno de los mitos sobre los que más se ha escrito. Sin embargo, y a pesar de los extensos análisis realizados sobre estos cuentos, se presta poca atención a las mujeres en estos: siempre presentes, pero raramente visibles. Para entender los papeles que desempeñan las mujeres en cuentos sobre niños cambiados y en el folklore en general, se ha realizado un análisis de una serie de textos protagonizados por estas criaturas con el objetivo de comprender mejor la manera en la que el folklore refleja las realidades sociales e idiosincrasias de Irlanda.

Palabras clave: Niño cambiado, Folklore, Cuentos de hadas, Papel de las mujeres, Irlanda, Análisis comparativo

## 2. *Introduction.*

### 2.1. *Introduction to the topic.*

A changeling is the name given in the mythologies of several regions to a person, most commonly a child, who is abducted by supernatural forces that then exchange it for an impostor. The same name is given, in general, to any person who is kidnapped by these creatures. This figure has become an emblematic icon of Ireland's folklore in particular, and as such it is at the center of numerous tales, myths and legends, written down and compiled by folklorists and reflected in literature by authors and poets. As such a recognized figure, it is to be expected that there exists a significant amount of research that is written on such texts. What most of the many academic texts written about changelings and the texts that include them fail to acknowledge or to mention is the presence and relevance of women within them. This project exists in order to contribute to this limited scholarship and filling in the gap, with its main goal consisting of a thorough analysis of the roles performed by female characters in a set of given stories.

In order to achieve this analysis, this project has been structured into seven parts. First, a contextualization of the topic will be given from both a cultural and intellectual perspective. Secondly, the hypothesis of the research will be defined. In the third place, it will include an explanation of the methodology that was followed in order to complete it. Fourthly, a set of seven chosen fairy tales featuring changelings will be analyzed with a particular focus on the women that appear on it, and a series of conclusions will be drawn on said analysis. Finally, both a detailed bibliography and an annex containing all the texts that were submitted to analysis will be included.

This topic was chosen after a lifelong interest in the history and folklore of Ireland. The influence of media like movies, TV series and podcasts, where fairies and changelings in particular are at the forefront, led to a particular interest in this creature, only incremented by its real-life impact. During a literary review that took place during the drafting of this project with the goal of grasping prior scholarship about changelings, it was highlighted that, despite the repeated and steady presence of women in these tales, they were paid little, if any, attention at all. I noticed that they stood in the background in most cases; however, if any of them were to be removed, or the role they played altered, the rest of the story would change completely or simply not stand. It was this contradiction that inspired me to see this project through.

It is my hope that by the end of this project the reader will have achieved a better understanding of the figure of the changeling, of women in folklore as well as Irish society, and of the relationship between all.

## 2.2 Context.

### 2.2.1. Cultural context.

The motif of the changeling has become highly representative of Celtic folklore: the faulty replacement left behind by supernatural beings after they kidnapped a human child. Depending on the national folklore that is being examined, this supernatural being takes one form or another: these are trolls in Scandinavia (Ashliman, 1997), xanas in Spain (Sánchez Vicente and Cañedo Valle, 2003), and fairies in Ireland. This fairy substitute is often portrayed as physically deformed in some way, possessing facial hair or elongated teeth; in addition, they do not develop the same way a regular child would, and are commonly described as having “failed to thrive” (Schoon Eberly, 1988). The fate that awaited these changelings was, in most cases, rather unfavorable: the common methods to be rid of the fairy child included beatings, burnings, and drowning, leading to historical cases of infanticide like that of Michael Leahy, a four-year-old boy who drowned to death after three days of being submitted to a water ritual meant to “put the fairy out of it” (Crofton Crocker, 1828).

Though the victims of kidnapping are, in most stories, newborn babies and infants, there exist historical reports of adults being taken, particularly women and new mothers, with the notable difference that these people would become replaced by logs of wood or inanimate objects rather than a fairy impostor (Briggs, 1976). Several reasons are given as to why this exchange is said to happen in the first place in mythology, ranging from fairies’ mischievous and evil nature, often seen in Irish folklore, to the need for a servant (Briggs, 1976). All in all, despite the broad differences between each myth and each version, there are a series of characteristics that tie Irish changelings to each other and identify them as such, and no other.

In literature, Irish authors in particular seem to partake in the historical fascination with changelings; one of the clearest examples, as well as one of the most iconic, of this is WB Yeats’s poem *The Stolen Child* (1889). The poem, which draws from traditional sources, depicts the kidnapping of a human child by a fairy who entices them away; the author, greatly interested in folklore, would later publish other books on Irish mythology, including *Folk Tales of Ireland* in 1892.

*Come away, O human child!*

*To the waters and the wild*

*With a faery, hand in hand,*

*For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.*<sup>1</sup>

Changelings have permeated into popular culture, with references to it being made in TV series, movies and music. Movies are made wearing the title of ‘changeling’ and referencing its mythology; fairy children become enemies to fight against, there are horror movies and aliens and even children’s shows that feature creatures that are either outright named ‘changelings’, or reference changeling mythology<sup>2</sup>. This proves the extraordinary manner in which changelings have made their way into the present day.

It should be noted that, despite the overrepresentation of European changelings in popular culture, histories of children being taken by supernatural means exist in other continents; particularly remarkable is the case of the Igbo people in Nigeria, who in their folklore count with a figure called the ogbanje. The ogbanje is a malicious spirit, taking the form of a child, that plagues a family and particularly a woman by reincarnating once and again into her children, then intentionally dying. A common solution to prevent the ogbanje from making its return would be to mutilate it, though it could return (Ilechukwu, 2007). The similarities are so many that Igbo people often translate the word “ogbanje” as “changeling” themselves, as can be seen in the glossary of Igbo words and phrases included in the novel *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe (“Things Fall Apart: Igbo Words and Phrases | SparkNotes”) which explains what an ogbanje is through a comparison to a changeling. All in all, the parallels between both figures are worthy of analysis, but so is the ogbanje on its own, recently rediscovered yet still a fairly obscure figure representing a rich folklore that cannot be ignored.

Given these points –the description of a changeling’s characteristics, their presence in literature and popular culture, and their connection to other figures from folklore across the world–, the Irish changeling becomes ever more fascinating in context and its study turns into an adventure through time, space and cultural production.

### 2.2.2. *Intellectual context.*

Present-day academic writing on changelings mostly follows one of four distinct paths: folklore studies and the study of fairy lore and tradition in the context of Ireland and other areas of Celtic influence; women’s studies regarding specific events in women’s rights, history and roles; medical discourse, specifically in the realm of disability studies; and finally, the fields of criminal law and prosecution from a historical point of view.

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from *The Stolen Child*, by WB Yeats.

<sup>2</sup> References *Changeling* (Clint Eastwood, 2008), the CW’s *Supernatural*, the BBC’s *Torchwood*, and Discovery Family’s *My Little Pony*.

In the case of scholarship of changelings in the ambit of fairy lore, articles like Séamas Mac Philib's "The Changeling (ML 5058) Irish Versions of a Migratory Legend in Their International Context" contrast and analyze several different changeling folklore stories. This source gathers a group of stories that were compiled from direct informants by collectors such as Lady Gregory and Tom Munnely, most of which feature common elements. The examination of these stories results in a more comprehensive understanding of the characteristics of changelings according to popular belief and allow for a comparison with international versions of the myth for folklore research purposes. For example, Irish changelings and their traits or behavior inside the stories they protagonize are contrasted to Scottish changelings: both variants are said to be pipe players (Mac Philib, 1991). Other traits that are examined include a comparison of what causes the changeling to reveal itself as such: in Ireland, England, Wales and regions as far as Lithuania it is brewing eggshells, which has become synonymous with changeling stories (Mac Philib, 1991). These kinds of comparisons are invaluable to folklorists and researchers who seek to fully define the changeling and to explore how a single tradition could have traveled the world.

As for women's studies, particular cases in the history of Irish changelings might be studied and analyzed at an academic level when attempting to explore women's roles. The most prominent changeling case pertaining women in the modern era, as well as the case in which the most has been written, is that of Bridget Cleary. Cleary, a woman from County Tipperary, was burned to death by her husband after he and others on their community suspected her of having been exchanged by a fairy. The case of Cleary was compared to witch burnings, as it was judged by contemporaries in the legal processes that ensued as a case of witchcraft, when it might have been a case of illness in women being badly assessed by men (McGrath, 1982). The negative impact folklore beliefs and changeling beliefs in particular can have on women's lives is, therefore, a matter of study. Other angles explore the roles that women play in folklore, as is the case of women's storytelling, through their roles in changeling stories. Collectors like the aforementioned Lady Gregory and the poet WB Yeats remarked on the particular link between women and tales of the supernatural, while simultaneously remarking on the gender-specific alleged punishments that might be inflicted on women that speak up about fairies, which often made it more challenging to gather stories from them (VeJVoda, 2004). In Mac Philib's previously mentioned paper, it is noted that "females are rarely cast in the role of active rescuers of the kidnapped children"; however, women often play the role of "wise woman" who give advice on how to dispose of the creature (Mac Philib, 1991). In all, changelings have in the recent decades become a topic of discussion for feminist theory due to the roles that women play and do not play in changeling stories and folklore as a whole.

Following with this, in the realm of medical discourse, most scholarship verses on the study of medical causes or explanations for changeling myths. Nowadays, changelings are

acknowledged to have been children who failed to thrive and meet developmental milestones because of mental or physical disabilities; in Susan Schoon Eberly's "Fairies and the Folklore of Disability", a variety of genetic conditions are explored and associated with changeling tales, thus giving scientific hypotheses that might offer a worldly explanation. One of these explanations given by Schoon Eberly includes the careful examination of physical descriptions of changelings from sources such as Joseph Jacobs's *English Fairy Tales* (1860), which compared to the physiognomy of particular disabilities like Hunter's syndrome, which is of later onset in infants, could explain changeling discourse including the sudden change from a normally developing child to one that failed to thrive (Schoon Eberly, 1988). Therefore, it is apparent that there exists a possibility for interdisciplinary research between the fields of folklore and medicine in order to give hypotheses as to the reality behind the myths.

Lastly, regarding law, historical records of prosecution against both changelings and those who acted against them give modern researchers an insight into the history of Irish law and how it was applied in society, particularly during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the era from where most surviving records come. In the vast majority of changeling stories and myth, the human child is recovered when the fairy is either returned to its folk or scared away. Though some stories feature rather harmless ways to make the fairy reveal its true nature, like surprising it (Mac Philib, 1991), the methods used in order to make it return the human child were for the most part barbaric: children were submitted to drowning and hot coals, suffered exposure and the ritual use of poisonous plants, and sometimes were outright beaten (Sugg, 2022). Some of these children survived the ordeal, yet some did not, and the legal cases of infanticide and murder that arose from this are studied by legal scholars seeking to explore the phenomenon and its real-life consequences or impact. For example, there exist records of a 1865 legal case brought against a woman of Irish origins in New York City "for causing the death of a child by making it stand on hot coals, to try if it were her own truly-begotten child, or a changeling", or a child who was saved after being "taken out by a servant to be exposed on a shovel on the doorstep" in County Limerick in 1842 (Sugg, 2022). As these cases and the research made about them prove, changeling belief had real-life consequences, often fatal, that were taken to court and impacted the course of law, therefore making it logical that legal researchers have put their focus on them.

The written and academic production on changelings throughout the last decades is an indicator of the manner in which changeling myths are approached in modern research: either as part of wider research on folklore, as part of recent women's studies and feminist readings, in an attempt to give the myth a scientific basis, or alternatively, as part of investigation into law and criminal cases of the past. This shows how exactly changelings are perceived by current scholars: as investigative material, a possibility for connection with other disciplines, and a mystery to solve.



### 2.3. Hypothesis.

During this project, I have found that women in changeling myths tend to have a role as cunning or wise women that offer advice on the banishing of a fairy; how a limited minority of changelings are girls; and how the mother is often blamed or directly responsible for her child being kidnapped. This all contributes to the overall role of women as vital in changeling stories despite not being at their center as main characters, making women as invisible as they are essential: a framework without which the story would not stand nor be complete, yet unseen, passive. This all goes to connect with the difficulty to place women's role in folklore as a whole in a territory such as Ireland, which struggles to reconcile its rather egalitarian Celtic past with its clergy controlled, misogynistic early modernity.

### 2.4. Methodology.

For the purpose of carrying out this project, the wider topic of Irish folklore, which had long been of great interest to me, was narrowed down from general consideration to a figure in particular, that of the changeling. The reason changelings were singled out among the rest of fairies, creatures and adjacent was its iconicity; through popular culture and enduring mythology, it has become a symbol, and thus illustrative, of Irish folklore. After that, a corpus of five representative texts was chosen from two main sources which themselves use direct sources used from informants: Séamas Mac Philib's "The Changeling (ML 5058) Irish Versions of a Migratory Legend in Their International Context" (1991) and Crofton Crocker's *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* (1828). These texts were analyzed comparatively among them with a particular focus on the women characters present in them and the role they play, or do not, within the story. This was all done considering further bibliography to deepen the understanding not just of the figure of the changeling, but also of the position occupied by women at that time and place and in folklore as a whole, in the hopes of proving the hypothesis posed at the beginning of the project.

## 3. Analysis of women's roles in Irish changeling stories.

### 3.1. Women as cunning women.

The first and most obvious role that is occupied by women in popular changeling stories is that of a folk healer or wise woman. An obscure figure present in the folklore of the British Isles, the 'cunning folk' or 'wise-folk' encompassed the roles of "fortune-teller, astrologer, herbalist, medical doctor, veterinary surgeon and witch-doctor" (Davies, 1997). Scholarship about cunning people is fairly limited due to a lack of primary sources, however, their functions are well documented: they were tasked to find the culprits of crimes, as matchmakers, undoers of curses and casters of charms. Though most cunning folk were men, the difference was not vast, and cunning women were not only not considered witches despite their line of work suggesting so,

but also businesswomen who counted with a considerable degree of independence, influence and wealth (Davies, 1997). In Ireland, cunning women were referred to as *bean feasa*, literally ‘woman of knowledge’, and were a substantial part of Irish folklore and society. Other titles ascribed to them include *bean leighis* (‘woman of healing’), *cailleach* (‘old woman, hag’), or *bean chumhachtach* (‘fortune-telling woman’), as well as two terms in English: ‘strange woman’ and ‘old woman’ (Cruaíaoich, 2005). These women’s profession as healers and general solvers of supernatural trouble implied that *bean feasa* were responsible for the identification of changelings, as can be seen in our corpus of stories.

In two of the five texts (*Brewing Eggshells* and *Mary Scannell*) a wise woman or cunning woman is involved in the story as the provider of a solution for the parents’ plight in being rid of the changeling and getting their true child back. In *Brewing Eggshells*, she is even identified by name: Ellen Leah, or Grey Ellen, has the supernatural ability to “tell where the dead are” and “charm away” several afflictions, perfectly fitting a *bean feasa*:

She had the gift, however she got it, of telling where the dead were, and what was good for the rest of their souls; and could charm away warts and wens, and do a great many wonderful things of the same nature. (Crofton Croker, 1823)

It is this cunning woman, Ellen Leah, who confirms Mrs Sullivan’s suspicions that her child is a changeling, and who gives her the method to make the fairy reveal itself, which is by brewing eggshells; not only that, she also advises her to “take the red hot poker and cram it down his ugly throat” if the child turns out to truly be a changeling.

"Put down the big pot, full of water, on the fire, and make it boil like mad; then get a dozen new-laid eggs, break them, and keep the shells, but throw away the rest; when that is done, put the shells in the pot of boiling water, and you will soon know whether it is your own boy or a fairy. If you find that it is a fairy in the cradle, take the red hot poker and cram in down his ugly throat, and you will not have much trouble with him after that I promise you." (Crofton Croker, 1823)

Ellen Leah fits the profile of the *bean feasa* in other ways, however: her nickname being ‘Grey’ implies that she is elderly, which is “a rule” of the wise woman (Cruaíaoich, 2005). In the case of the other text mentioned, *Mary Scannell*, though not given a name, the *bean feasa* gives advice to the titular character “in a whisper” to abuse the changeling child to make it go away on account of “not liking the usage it got from Mary Scannell, who understood how to treat it”. If Mrs Scannell knows, or learns, how to treat this child, it is due to the involvement of the wise woman, always with the solution at hand to be free of the changeling.

[The wise woman] told her in a whisper not to give it enough to eat, and to beat and pinch it without mercy, which Mary Scannell did; and just in one week after to the day, when she awoke in the morning, she found her own child lying by her side in the bed! (Crofton Croker, 1823)

According to Crualaoich (2005), there are two kinds of crisis that a *bean feasa* is contacted for in stories: a less urgent crisis like a missing animal, lack of ingredients, and similar misfortunes; and mysterious, sudden illnesses affecting people and animals. Changeling children can, therefore, be fit into the second category, being at first glance a spontaneous sickness striking a child. Additionally, the *bean feasa* can either appear at the scene without being called for means of her magical wisdom, or be intentionally visited by those who seek her help. One example of each method to contact the wise woman is seen in each text mentioned: in *Brewing Eggshells*, Mrs Sullivan meets Ellen Leah by chance, whereas in *Mary Scannell* Mrs Scannell purposefully goes to the wise woman after correctly assessing her child has been exchanged.

One day who should Mrs. Sullivan meet but a cunning woman, well known about the country by the name of Ellen Leah (or Grey Ellen). (Crofton Croker, 1823)

She guessed how the case was, and, without stop or stay, away she took it in her arms, pretending to be mighty fond of it all the while, to a wise woman. (Crofton Croker, 1823)

Despite the central role *bean feasa* play in changeling stories, these do not usually offer any comprehensive explanations or looks into their lives, motivations, reputations or work besides being the needed problem solver, nothing more than a plot device needed to bring the story forward. Nevertheless, it is a proven historical fact that *bean feasa* were a prevalent part of daily life in rural Ireland, that they were of great value to their communities due to the many services they offered, and that they knew what to do when the rest of the village or town did not. This presents our first contradiction: it is remarkable that *bean feasa* play a vital role, where without them *Brewing Eggshells* and *Mary Scannell* would not reach their satisfactory conclusion, yet they are not their own characters; rather, they belong to an archetype. This archetype tells us two things. First, that cunning women were present in the popular imagination enough to become an easily recognizable stock character, something I can prove through the research of Davies (1997) and Crualaoich (2005). Second, that the position *bean feasa* occupy in changeling stories, and therefore, it could be said, folklore as a whole, is an understated one: there but not there, active yet passive, real yet invented. This position, extending to women at large, will be seen in further research on the texts provided.

### 3.2. Women as changelings.

Continuing with the examination of roles of women, the second part is that of the changeling itself. It is a fact universally acknowledged that changelings are, in a vast majority, boys: in some rural areas, boys were dressed as girls for most of their infancy and early lives in order to swindle

any potential fairy kidnappers (Evans, 1957). This is well represented in the texts provided: from the five stories, only one of them features a female changeling: the text titled *Bagpipes and gold*. In the rest of them, the child taken is a male. Even in the case of *Bagpipes and gold*, the girl changeling is part of a pair together with her twin brother; no cases of lone girls have been found during this research. In spite of the seeming rarity of female changelings, the text itself makes no particular reference to it: the little girl is, together with her brother, part of an inseparable pair that is mostly alluded to as ‘they’ or ‘the son and daughter’, and there is never any attention paid to the differences between both creatures, save for the fact the female changeling speaks less. The few words she speaks are in repetition of each other, with all her lines consisting of replying “shut your toothless mouth” at her twin brother. The female changeling’s scarcity of words, taken with her male counterpart’s much more expressive nature, can be interpreted to be a submission to him; as if he were the leader, of sorts, of their association.

After a while he said to her, 'Rise up sister and give me down my pipes and I'll play you a tune that will gladden your heart.'

'Shut your toothless mouth,' said the sister . . . For a third time the son asked the daughter to get up and fetch down his pipes so that he might play a tune to which she could dance and gladden her heart. It would be very good for her to hear a tune and dance for a little while.

‘Shut your toothless mouth’, said the sister. (Mac Philip, 1991)

In the words of Ashliman (1997), girls are rarely changelings because they are assumed to be “less useful”. This brings up questions of what exactly the kidnapped children are meant to be useful for: that is, the mission that the fairies wish to accomplish by taking a human child. According to most sources, the purpose of the fairy kidnapping and of the changeling phenomenon in general is one of three: for the human child to become a servant to the fairies, out of plain malice and ill-intent against humans, and to feel the love of a human child. Other reasons cited include feeding, in those stories that assume fairies to be unable to nurse their young themselves (Briggs, 1976). None of those reasons, at least not at first sight, would make a young girl less desirable to fairies. A young girl could perform the functions of slave and loving child just as well as a young boy, in the fairies’ logic, unless girls are taken as being inherently less capable than boys. However, it must be noted that boys are more statistically prone to early infant death and disease, and thus would be the victims of alleged changelings more often in real life (Schoon Eberly, 1988). This is very likely the final explanation for the stark contrast in numbers between girl and boy changelings.

As for the case of older changelings, most are indeed women. Despite the remarkable lack of scholarship on adult changelings, there exist cases on the historical record: Bridget Cleary, who has been previously mentioned, is the most infamous due to its unfortunate outcome. Two main

types of adult changeling can be found: those taken as adults and those who were taken as children, then were allegedly rescued and lived into adulthood. The latter is the case of one Annie McIntire from Donegal, who in 1909, when applying for a pension, claimed to have been abducted by fairies as a child (Sugg, 2018). As for the former, it was common that adults who were kidnapped were, as mentioned before in this project, substituted with a clearer purpose: young women were taken as brides, whereas new mothers were taken to nurse fairy children, with beautiful women being encouraged to keep their appearance modest in order not to call any unwanted fairy attention. Additionally, human midwives were believed to be taken to assist in fairy births (Briggs, 1976). This is exemplified in the text titled *The Recovered Bride*, in which a young woman named Margaret disappears right after her wedding and later contacts her husband, who manages to rescue her. Margaret described herself as being “now in the power of the fairies”, marking a clear distinction from child changelings who never contact their parents after they are taken, mostly because they are infants or too young to speak. This kidnapped bride fits perfectly into records of adult changelings, being in the liminal space of new wife who is rescued by a man.

"Do not be disturbed, dear husband," said the appearance; "I am now in the power of the fairies, but if you only have courage and prudence we may be soon happy with each other again . . . The fairies got power over me because I was only thinking of you, and did not prepare myself as I ought for the sacrament. I made a bad confession, and now I am suffering for it. Don't forget what I have said." (Kennedy, 1866)

It is worth emphasizing that, despite representing a considerable minority, some fairytales do feature instances of male adult changelings. This is the case of the husband in *Twenty Years with the Good People*, who disappears from his home for twenty years before returning to the human world with shoemaking abilities, which are often ascribed to fairies.

Well, lo and behold you, in a week's time he started to work, and the boots he made were a surprise to the whole country round, and I believe he lived for nine or ten years ater that, but he never tould her or any one where he was, but of course everbody knew that 'twas wood [with] the good people. (D. Knox, 1917)

Though the man is unable to tell the story, saying “some time [he] might have the power, but not now”, it is universally agreed that he was with the fairy folk. Even if these only represent a small amount compared to the rest of texts found, they are worth noting, as they may have reflected even more popular belief on changelings.

All in all, the lack of sources for female changelings does not erase the fact that there exists both historical and folkloric evidence of women changelings and young girls who allegedly were kidnapped, proving that women were, in praxis, just as susceptible to fairy abduction as men were. However, and taking into account the reasons exposed for the reason this difference exists, these myths contribute to making female victims more invisible and less relevant than the male ones,

as well as to, in the case of the women harmed under suspicion of being changelings like Bridget Cleary, their socially accepted mistreatment.

### 3.3. *Women as responsible.*

Finally, the portrayal of women as responsible for changeling kidnappings will be discussed. Four different manners in which women carry responsibility in the texts have been identified: as fundamentally vulnerable to supernatural threats, as those who do or do not notice that the child has been exchanged for a fairy, as careless enough for their child to be taken, and as the kidnapper of the child herself. These roles, which are largely negative, will be explored in detail while considering the selected texts and examples contained on them.

#### 3.3.1. *Women as kidnappers in changeling stories.*

Let us start by the last: women as kidnappers. In the first text, here titled *Tom Heneghan*, the titular character witnesses a “little woman” physically attempting to take a child from his cradle through a window. This little woman, considering the subject matter, is a fairy stealing a baby from his human parents, whose efforts to successfully produce a changeling are thwarted by Heneghan. The fairy does, nevertheless, half-complete the exchange, leaving some sort of substitute resembling a dead child to fool the parents after Heneghan takes the baby himself. After the town is alerted of the death of the infant, Heneghan gives the parents their child back.

‘He didn’t die’, says Tom. ‘Fetch the priest’, he says, ‘I have the child safe and sound in the house yonder.’ He told them how things were and he brought them the child and the parents were very proud when they got it. When they looked in the cradle it was empty, there was nothing there. (Mac Philib, 1991)

Though a fairy, the kidnapper had taken the appearance of a woman. The debate on the gender of fairies is a much more complex one, however the choice of the fairy to be presented as a woman can be read in connection with one of our prior topics: that of the purpose of changelings. This can be read from the connection between female fairies, motherhood and changelings, which has always been tight. To exemplify this deep interaction, Booss, in her revision of Yeats (1986)’s *A Treasury of Irish Myth, Legend, and Folklore*, recounts at least one story of a fairy woman appearing at a human house to undo the exchange made, wanting her own child back. If read from this light, that of fairies as possessing a motherly instinct strong enough to willingly walk into enemy territory to recover their baby, the kidnapper woman in *Tom Heneghan* can be assumed to be one of those fairies that, according to Briggs (1976), wished to feel the love of a human child. This brings another layer of meaning to the tale and humanizes the fairy. If, however, another of Briggs’ possible reasons for fairies committing the theft is interpreted, which is ill-intent and mischief, the association of a woman-shaped fairy with an act of pure evil becomes equally significant, this time, for the negative. The reader may choose which version to believe best: it is

our opinion that it is improbable a fairy, let alone a fairy woman, was portrayed in anything other than a negative light, and that the second reading is far more likely.

### 3.3.2. *Women as careless in changeling stories.*

Secondly, there is women represented as careless, having their child taken due to their negligence. In *Mary Scannell*, Mrs Scannell's infant boy is kidnapped and substituted by a changeling while she works in the fields, after having left him where she thought he would be safe.

One day in harvest time she went with several more to help in binding up the wheat, and left her child, which she was nursing, in a corner of the field, quite safe, as she thought, wrapped up in her cloak.

When she had finished her work, she returned where the child was, but in place of her own child she found a thing in the cloak that was not half the size... (Crofton Croker, 1823)

Luckily for her, the intervention of a cunning woman ensures her child is returned; nevertheless, it is a fact her initial forsaking of the baby is what caused the kidnapping. It is not complicated to read this particular tale as a cautionary one for mothers not to leave their babies unattended, not even if they assess the place they are leaving them as safe; and to immediately resort to the wisdom of the *bean feasa* if there is anything amiss with the child. And, as any cautionary tale, it can be interpreted as a scolding of sorts, as well, telling mothers whose children were supposedly changelings they were to blame for the abduction, and that they should have been more careful. Neither of these two sides of the coin are particularly kind to women and mothers: one assumes that they, much like children, need guidance via folktales, whilst the other outright victim-blames. Both these interpretations, therefore, reflect rather badly on women and the responsibility entrusted to them of caring for their children.

Another case of this very same representation is found in texts like *The Recovered Bride*. In this tale, Margaret is quoted as admitting that “the fairies got power over [her] because [she] was only thinking of [her husband]”, and she failed to prepare correctly for the sacrament. Again, a woman being distracted results in a kidnapping, this time, her own. Much like the ones featuring child changelings, this text can be read as a cautionary tale meant to remind new wives to take their sacrament seriously and do not let themselves be distracted by the rest of aspects of the wedding, lest they lose the protection against fairies that is given by said sacrament. All in all, women are largely represented in fairy tales dealing with changelings as absent-minded, or even negligent, which might have contributed to a misogynistic lack of trust in them.

### 3.3.3. *Women as aware of the changeling.*

In the third place, women can or not be represented as those noticing the change. Some of them, like the mothers in *Brewing Eggshells* and *Mary Scannell*; in the rest, it is a man who notices

and discloses the truth to her. Therefore, it can be surmised that it is more common for men to perceive the child is a changeling before the mother herself does; it is common for that man to be a tailor or some sort of traveling tradesman, who because of their work travels from one house to the next and carries with them a significant amount of worldly knowledge (Mac Philib, 1991). Further evidence for this is found in another of the texts, *The Spade*, in which it is a blacksmith who realizes the true nature of the changeling: after the child calls his father's attention to a crack in his spade, he takes it to the smith, who successfully identifies the changeling by noting that it is such a small fracture that it would only have been noticed by an actual blacksmith.

When he showed it to the smith, the smith asked whether it was he himself who had noticed the crack in the spade. He said that it was his child who had never walked a step. The smith said that only a good smith could have noticed that in a spade.

'Be careful that it is your own child you have', he said. (Mac Philib, 1991)

As it can be seen, it is a tradesman, rather than the changeling's parents, who sees the fairy for what it is. It is also a man, this time the missing Margaret's husband, who notices that she has been taken in *The Recovered Bride*; not only that, but Margaret was abducted in the absence of the rest of the women in the wedding.

"Oh!" cried he, "Margaret is carried away by the fairies, I'm sure. The girls were not left the room for half a minute when I went in, and there is no more sign of her there than if she never was born." (Kennedy, 1866)

Linking back to the portrayal of women as careless, this could be read as women being inattentive of their children and, yet again, mistrusted.

#### 3.3.4. *Women as vulnerable to the fairies.*

Introducing a fourth role, is that of women as inherently more susceptible to supernatural threats. Though not explicitly remarked upon in the given texts, traditional beliefs and thoughts about the predisposition of women to kidnappings and fairy attention play a key role in changeling belief, and thus in the stories studied. Women who had recently given birth were described as "the most dangerous being[s] on earth" (Schoon Eberly, 1988) due to the enormous risk that their liminal state posed. New mothers were considered so much at risk that they would not as much as leave their bed for nine days after giving birth; furthermore, they were blessed by a priest to prevent them from being preyed on by evil spirits that surrounded them, a process known as 'churching' (O'Connor, 2017). The mothers' vulnerability extends to their children, as well: Yeats (1986) speaks of newborns and young children as having 'weak souls', and thus being more difficult to defend from otherworldly threats. Due to this, various rituals were introduced that had



the ultimate goal of deterring a fairy kidnapping, including leaving a pair of tongs in the cradle or an “old waistcoat” across it (O’Connor, 2017). The introduction of the Christian Catholic faith fed into this belief, as young children who died before being baptized could not go to Heaven, let alone if they were fairies. There exist plenty of explanations for why exactly women were considered to be closer to the supernatural and thus more prone to fairy abductions, ranging from a lack of understanding of women’s mental health and illnesses, like postpartum depression, to misogynistic rhetoric on the inherent impurity or, later with Christianity, sinfulness of women. The precautions taken to save both their lives and their children’s, however, are evidence of a great amount of civilized care imparted by the community, something not very often discussed when it comes to changelings. People were scared, yes, and that often took them to inhuman extremes; this would not have happened if they did not care deeply about the well-being of the community, the mother, and the child.

### 3.3.5. *Women as storytellers of changeling tales.*

Also implicit in the texts, yet worthy of attention, is the role of women in folklore as storytellers. In the sources from which the analyzed texts were extracted, the main primary sources taken to gather the fairy tales were women. The way these female storytellers were treated by the work varies: whilst Crofton Croker treats them with “easygoing acceptance and respect”, other compilers of folklore like Jeremiah Curtin are biased against women, and feature revenge-seeking, violent women who are forced into silence (Vejvoda, 2004). Curtin’s work dates from later than Crofton Croker’s, indicating a significant shift on mentality about women throughout the 19th century. It is our opinion that the author’s prejudice must be taken into account when analyzing these stories, as it is vital in folklore research to remember the fact a folklorist always makes choices when it comes to choosing, or not choosing, the tales that will be written down and transmitted. This might be an explanation for the reasons women are portrayed in the way that they are in the changeling myths that have been chosen.

## 4. *Findings and conclusion.*

Despite the general conclusion that women in changeling stories assume, in the texts examined, a negative role, those that take action in order to fix the changeling are found to be always women. We can see this in almost all of our texts: in *Bagpipes and gold*, it is the mother who throws the changeling twins into the river.

She tied them up in a cloth pretending to bring them on a visit to her uncle’s house. There was a bridge on the river she was to cross. When she was in the middle of it, she threw them and the cloth into the river.

‘You had to’, said the son, ‘we would never have left you without tearing out your heart.’ (Mac Philib, 1991)

It is the same for *Brewing Eggshells*, where Mrs Sullivan both exposes the changeling and is very willing to “pitch the wicked thing that was in it into the pot of boiling water”; and for *Mary Scannell*, where the boy’s mother solves the changeling situation thanks to the advice of a cunning woman, who tells her to beat it. In spite of this, according to Mac Philib (1991)’s research, an overwhelming majority of saviors in those stories featuring a rescue are male. This contradicts our research and findings on the sampled texts and brings up further questions. I can, however, conclude that the few rescuers that are not male are the children’s mothers, and that they have found their way into popular culture and iconic myths in an easier manner than male rescuers.

What I can conclude from this is that, once again, it is very difficult to find a straight, good-for-all answer for the trouble of female representation in changeling stories. Women are simultaneously depicted as pillars of the community on account of their healing abilities, useless to fairies unless it is to perform a reproductive or motherly role, responsible for their children being kidnapped, and brave enough to take the steps necessary to get them back. It is yet again a contradictory position, just as the role of women in Ireland has always been contradictory: a staple of society, particularly as mothers<sup>2</sup>, yet lacking basic, vital rights like that of abortion until very recent years. It can be stated that folklore, which has reflecting real life and society as one of its main functions, depicts actual mentalities and customs in regards to women. The women in changeling fairytales – wise women, mothers and female changelings alike, occupy a role that is almost liminal, navigating a center that does not hold by one side or the other, and this precarious position had real life consequences and referents.

Through a thorough examination of folklore, we as researchers can learn plenty of information about the culture that produced it at any given time. It can even be said that, ultimately, folklore and its tales are just ways that we humans have to rationalize what we cannot understand, and in the process, we reflect the society we live in. Irish changeling tales are a perfect representation of this, as they work to portray issues pertaining the society they originated in, as well as attempt to give an explanation to high infant mortality rates and concepts as complicated to grasp when lacking education and science as disability. In particular, I have observed how the women in these stories fulfill very varied roles. They are *bean feasa*, cunning women giving advice and wisdom; adult changelings being kidnapped during times of transition, like new mothers and brides; or alternatively, responsible for their children being exchanged by a fairy impostor, whether that is because they perform the abduction themselves, because they are neglectful, or because they are more vulnerable. Furthermore, a variety of other factors come into play and have been observed, including who is the storyteller and who finds out about the kidnapping. Nevertheless, and despite the fact most women in changeling stories occupy either a

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<sup>2</sup> Note the popular depiction of the nation of Ireland as a mother or the very common stock character of the “Irish mammy”.

villainized, negative role or a passive one with little to no agency, women cannot be erased: removing a single one of the women analyzed, from Mrs Sullivan to Margaret the kidnapped bride to Grey Ellen, the wise woman, would make the rest of the story crumble. Women, from their invisible role, are a skeleton to the rest of the story upon which the tale is construed and built, and without them the tale would not exist.

Despite the inconveniences I faced and that come associated by nature with the study of folklore, such as a lack of accessible primary sources and information, it was a matter of patience, plentiful research and reading between the lines. Most of these obstacles were sorted thanks to the prior research of folklorists who managed to compile tales from many different sources, including Mac Philib and Crofton Croker. Further comparative research could be performed between the roles examined and those in other, similar mythologies featuring changelings and changeling-adjacent creatures, such as that of Scotland and Nigeria.

All in all, I can confidently say that the analysis performed has successfully studied what women do and what they are in a set of given popular tales about Irish changelings. It is not a reach to assume my conclusions may extend to Irish folklore in general, to folklore, and to society due to the unbreakable bond between the two. The analysis of the found roles offers a not entirely comprehensive, but very revealing look at the liminal space inhabited by women in a place as particular as Ireland, where they have always occupied a middle ground between revered and demonized. The complicated history of Ireland has led to a complicated society in turn: Celtic and matrilineal on one hand; then zealously Christian Catholic on the other. As a society, Ireland has struggled to properly place women inside of it, and this is faithfully reflected in their folklore and myths, which could not exist without women yet relegate them to secondary or villain roles. In order to better understand Irish society, we must understand its mythology, and I hope that through this study I have at the very least shed some light on the intricacies of the representation of women in Irish folklore about changelings and thus on the position that Irish women occupy on society.

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