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| **ADDITIONAL NOTES** | |
Unhoming the Child: 

Queer Paths and Precarious Futures in Kissing the Witch

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Abstract:

Focusing on Emma Donoghue’s fairy-tale retellings for young readers, this essay explores the implications of stories that stray from the conventional script of children’s literature by rejecting normative models of belonging as well as happily-ever-after permanence. Instead of securely positioning the child on the path toward reproductive futurism and the creation of a new family home, these tales present radical visions of queer futurity and kinship and upend normative child-adult relations. Drawing in particular on Sara Ahmed’s work on happiness and Judith (Jack) Halberstam’s analysis of queer time, I analyze how Donoghue’s versions of “Cinderella” and “Hansel and Gretel” unhome their protagonists and cast them outside of heteronormative temporality.

Keywords:
home; children’s literature; fairy tales; queer theory; Emma Donoghue

“The future is queerness’s domain,” José Esteban Muñoz writes in Cruising Utopia, because queerness, given its intimate links to hope and potentiality, “is always in the horizon” (1, 11). Muñoz’s theory of queer futurity thus rejects Lee Edelman’s claim that the future is envisioned only on behalf of the figure of the child and has no place for queers: Edelman’s polemic No Future argues that because politics is enmeshed within the parameters of reproductive futurism, which promotes perpetual sameness based on generational succession and heteronormative temporalities, “we are no more able to conceive of a politics without a fantasy of the future than we are able to
conceive of a future without the figure of the Child” (11). Muñoz questions the stark opposition between the child and the queer that Edelman establishes, countering that “[r]acialized kids, queer kids, are not the sovereign princes of futurity” (95). Kathryn Bond Stockton even asserts that all children are queer due to their culturally enforced asexuality coupled with the assumption of their future heterosexuality (7). Stockton’s argument illuminates the peculiar temporalities of childhood that delineate children not only as “not-yet-straight” (7) but also as not-yet adults and hence, the cultural assumption goes, in need of training. This very assumption that children need to be trained, however, relies on the idea that children “are always already anarchic and rebellious, out of order and out of time”—or, in other words, queer (Halberstam, Art 27).

Given the queer temporalities of childhood, it is perhaps no surprise that even as children’s literature captures the carnivalesque elements found in contemporary constructions of childhood, the genre nonetheless also serves to train child readers and guide them along the straight path toward normative adulthood. Hence even when their pages are populated by queer figures such as witches or talking animals, children’s books often remain steeped in heteronormative notions of what constitutes a good and desirable life. The extent to which the genre of children’s literature emphasizes the importance of home and family indicates that although witches and anthropomorphized animals may bring excitement and adventure, the queer nonconformity they embody must ultimately be left behind, barred from entering the safe, familial home to which protagonists return for their ostensibly happy ending. Although some texts celebrate not the return home but rather the creation of a new family that may consist of characters who do not share biological kinship ties, such texts too rely on the binaries of home/away and family/strangers in establishing what or who remains excluded and outside. In foregrounding the protections afforded by the family unit, the conventional script of children’s literature thus seeks to position both child characters and readers securely on the path toward reproductive futurism: “the trajectory of most . . . children’s texts . . . is to home the child subject, both the subject inside the book and the subject outside the book” (Reimer 2). Texts for young readers tend to highlight the safety of the familial, and familiar, home while depicting the time characters spend away from home, often in the company of nonnormative figures, as precarious and transitory. As home becomes aligned, in such texts, with what Judith (Jack) Halberstam calls “the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family” (Time 6), the time away is instead portrayed as carnivalesque, queer, and
out of sync with the normative demands of growing up. But what happens when characters are not homed in a straight time and place, when they remain, as it were, away and in queer time?

My essay seeks to respond to this question through a reading of Emma Donoghue’s *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins*, a collection of fairy-tale retellings that unhomes child and adult characters alike, presents radical visions of queer futurity, and upends normative child-adult relations. While classic fairy tales often home their protagonists in marriage or the family unit, Donoghue’s adaptations for adolescent readers keep characters off the straight path both at the end of each retelling and afterwards. Indeed, none of the characters’ stories truly ends: in a fashion that resembles a Russian nesting doll, each tale is told from the first-person perspective of a character in the previous tale, and hence even as this first-person narration ends, the character’s story continues in the tale that precedes it; as Cristina Bacchilega puts it, “the storytelling loops take each narrator spiraling back in time to her earlier life experiences and each listener spiraling forward toward another transformation” (61). Thus refuting the chronology and the closed, happy endings of classic fairy tales, the very structure of *Kissing the Witch* queers the temporality of reading and storytelling. Instead of following the “false narrative of continuity” and the “normative understandings of time and transmission” that Halberstam argues are evoked by the concept of family (*Art* 71), Donoghue’s collection posits alternative forms of relationality freed from the linearity of family succession and inheritance. While family is culturally constructed as the promise of “a form of belonging that binds the past to the present and the present to the future” via the progression from one generation to the next (Halberstam, *Art* 73), *Kissing the Witch* steps out of straight time and into a queer realm in which characters and readers alike are invited to engage in a productive forgetting of heteronormative temporality.

Consisting of twelve adaptations of classic fairy tales and one final original tale, Donoghue’s collection engages with pre-texts published by Charles Perrault, Madame le Prince de Beaumont, the Brothers Grimm, and Hans Christian Andersen, and it participates in the process of “writ[ing] back to the predominantly male canon” while subverting the patriarchal power structures that characterize many classic tales (Hennard 15). Donoghue’s retellings share their critique of gendered hierarchies with the fairy tales by second-wave feminist authors—in particular, Anne Sexton, Angela Carter, and Margaret Atwood—yet they differ from these earlier variants because
Donoghue establishes intertextual links not only to the canonized classic tales but also to existing feminist versions (Martin 7). *Kissing the Witch* thus “reclaims an alternative female tradition of women writers through intertextual references and allusions to Jane Austen, Christina Rossetti, Virginia Woolf, Anne Sexton, Olga Broumas, and Adrienne Rich” (Hennard 15), and it is the wealth of both patriarchal and feminist pre- and intertexts, Ann Martin contends, that enables Donoghue’s collection to grapple with concerns associated not with second-wave but third-wave feminism as it “includ[es] an emphasis on the complexities of female identities and sexualities, a foregrounding of interlocking forms of oppression, and a recognition of varied and sometimes subtle modes of political action” (7). Because of Donoghue’s adaptive strategies and intertextual links, Bacchilega asserts, *Kissing the Witch* “lovingly queries and queers the genre,” and the collection differs from other contemporary fairy-tale retellings by way of “relocating coming-of-age transformations in a nonnormative and varied syntax of desire and knowledge” (65). In foregrounding such nonnormative desires, however, *Kissing the Witch* refrains from replacing straight paths with other set paths or heteronormativity with homonormativity; instead, the collection’s open-ended structure and queer storytelling temporalities challenge all stable, singular identities as well as the illusion of utopian, happily-ever-after closure.

Instead of reading queerness in *Kissing the Witch* solely in terms of the volume’s representation of nonnormative identities, then, we can locate queerness, here “understood as the potential for metamorphosis and self-transformation,” in the text’s “insistence on the changeability of roles, situations and identifications” coupled “with the systematic challenge of binary oppositions” (Hennard 18). The individual tales in Donoghue’s text showcase how different possible futures open up when the heteronormative script is exposed as an oppressive mode and becomes subject to disidentification. I focus in particular on Donoghue’s versions of “Cinderella” and “Hansel and Gretel” to analyze how these tales unhome their protagonists and cast them outside of heteronormative temporality. The heroine of the former tale “know[s] how the story went: [her] future was about to happen,” but in turning away from the marriage plot script and realizing that she “had got the story all wrong,” this Cinderella instead reorients her desire toward the fairy godmother (5, 7). The latter story is told from the perspective of a girl whose disability renders her queer since she is of “no earthly use” for the reproduction of the family line (134). This tale, too, flips the script of its classic predecessor by celebrating not the return to the family home but the opening-up of the girl’s possible futures as she spends part of her life in the
woods with the witch character. Instead of sentimentalizing the familial home as a safe and comfortable space of belonging, these tales highlight their protagonists’ struggles with the oppressions and exclusions perpetrated in the name of both family and home. As these characters rebel against the conventional, heteronormative scripts they seem destined to follow, Donoghue presents us with nonnormative forms of belonging and relationality that challenge the ideology of family as well as the reproductive futurism that accompanies it.

Regarding the heteronormative scripts that prescribe whose life counts as “good” and “happy,” Sara Ahmed suggests that “happiness functions as a promise that directs you toward certain objects, as if they provide you with the necessary ingredients for a good life,” and it therefore “shap[es] the very terms through which individuals share their world with others, creating ‘scripts’ for how to live well” (Promise 54, 59). However, given the stronghold such happiness scripts have on our cultural imagination and given the lack of viable, livable alternatives, following the heteronormative path toward a presumed happily-ever-after can effectively be alienating and restrictive: “to follow the paths of life (marriage, reproduction) is to feel that what is before you is a kind of solemn progress, as if you were living somebody else’s life, simply going the same way others are going” (Promise 71). It is precisely this feeling of “living somebody else’s life” that haunts the young protagonist of the first story in Donoghue’s collection, “The Tale of the Shoe,” which takes the classic tale of “Cinderella” as its pre-text. The heteronormative script, overlapping as it does with the path toward the so-called good life and the happily-ever-after, is here articulated by voices in the girl’s head: “The shrill voices were all inside. Do this, do that, you lazy heap of dirt. They knew every question and answer, the voices in my head” (2). The tale thus illustrates the extent to which this script has been internalized by the character. We as readers furthermore expect the girl to follow the path that leads her into the safe arms of the prince and the presumed happiness that marriage represents; in part, this expectation is based on our familiarity with the “Cinderella” tale, but it also and more generally speaks to the pervasiveness in Euro-American culture of the marriage plot and its association with the good life.

For much of the short tale, the girl indeed acts according to the expectations she and we as readers have placed on this Cinderella character. She requests that the fairy godmother take her to the ball because “[i]sn’t that what girls are meant to ask for?” and once at the castle, she “knew just how [she] was meant to behave” (3, 4). Her
recounting of the prince’s proposal, in a setting that strikes the girl as “very fairy-tale,” makes explicit the safe but boring prospect this potential marriage represents for her: “As soon as the words began to leak out of his mouth, they formed a cloud in which I could see the future. . . . There was no harm in this man; what he proposed was white and soft, comfortable as fog. There was nothing to be afraid of” (6-7). But there is also nothing that excites her about this nondescript, conventional prince, and it is at this moment of the marriage proposal that the girl decides to stop listening to the voices screaming “Yes yes yes say yes before you lose your chance you bag of nothingness” (7). Her turning away from the heteronormative demands that have, up to this point, determined the course of her life involves the experience of disorientation, as there is now no longer a pre-trodden path to follow. Ahmed describes disorientation as “the feelings that gather when we lose our sense of who it is that we are. Such losses can be converted into the joy of a future that has been opened up” (Phenomenology 20). Indeed, for Donoghue’s Cinderella character, it is this disorientation that sets the stage for reorienting herself and her desire, in ways that heretofore had not presented themselves to her as possibilities.

“How could I not have noticed she was beautiful?” the girl now wonders about her fairy godmother (7), as things are coming into view that the heteronormative lens had previously blinded her to. Because compulsory heterosexuality determines a body’s possible actions while restricting others, Ahmed explains, it “diminishes the very capacity of bodies to reach what is off the straight line” (Phenomenology 91), and hence the girl can experience her desire for the fairy godmother only once she has departed from the straight path and is able to see beyond the prospective objects of desire proximate to that path. In envisioning a same-sex, intergenerational relationship with the fairy godmother, then, the girl’s orientation in the world has effectively been queered. Instead of grounding the narrator’s relationship with the older woman in the hierarchies “associated with a linear model of generational struggle” that emphasizes the older generation’s teachings and lessons, Donoghue moreover highlights “the discovery of new perspectives through a process of exchange and exploration between generations” that is inherently collaborative (Martin 8). The tale’s last line— “So then she took me home, or I took her home, or we were both somehow taken to the closest thing” (8)—further indicates that the narrator “is no longer located within the hierarchies associated with the heterosexual sphere” (Martin 17). This indeterminate home the two women now inhabit is a far cry from the homes one may
find, alongside safe and boring princes, when following the straight path to its final destination.

By emphasizing continuous transformations and the instability of identities, _Kissing the Witch_ defies the conventional closure not only of the fairy tale genre’s happily-ever-after but also of the children’s literature genre’s final homing of child characters. This homing takes place in texts for children most typically through the removal of the young protagonist from her initial home setting to a state of homeless precarity and, eventually, the return home and thus the reintroduction of the adult’s authority over the child character, who escaped from the adult’s grasp during her temporary homelessness. In following this Home/Away/Home Again plot structure, many texts for children actually afford their protagonists the opportunity to venture off the straight path laid out by the heteronormative, adult-controlled space that home represents. While away, child characters occupy a position that is not yet fixed but instead holds numerous future possibilities and thus the potential for different endings. It is during this time away that child characters may “grow sideways,” to use Stockton’s term, yet this sideways growth is halted once characters are homed again at the end of a text. Stockton explains that “sideways growth” points toward the “energy, pleasure, vitality, and (e)motion in the back-and-forth of connections and extensions that are not reproductive” and hence locates a different potential in children (and, for that matter, adults) than the “short-sighted, limited rendering of human growth” that “growing up” refers to (13, 11). The return home effectively returns child characters to straight time and the demands of reproductive futurism inherent to growing up, while the queer temporality of sideways growth is left behind.

In his discussion of the Home/Away/Home Again plot that permeates texts for children, Perry Nodelman foregrounds the protagonist’s final homing and concludes that it serves as an illustration of the genre’s inherent conservatism. Drawing on Freud’s study of the uncanny, Nodelman argues that “the law of home implies what it leaves outside merely by insisting it be left outside. The outside is already inside. It is there as the _unheimlich_” (224). He suggests that the uncanny, or _unheimlich_, is an element of home at the beginning of texts for children featuring the Home/Away/Home Again plot, and that the home at the end of such tales no longer bears this uncanny trace that the protagonist, through her adventures outside the home, has overcome: “At the end of children’s stories home finally becomes the safe place it was always supposed to be, a place for innocent childhood” (225). According to this analysis, the
child protagonist’s adventure ends when she reenters the protective space of the home, which is now void of any uncanny elements, and thus returns to the conventional family form and the normative path that was temporarily abandoned during the time away.

The Grimm Brothers’ fairy tale for children “Hansel and Gretel” illustrates the mechanisms of the Home/Away/Home Again plot as the child protagonists succeed in eradicating the uncanny presence in their home, here personified by their stepmother. It is this stepmother, in the Grimms’ version of the story, who convinces her resistant husband to abandon Hansel and Gretel in the forest since the family’s abject poverty makes it impossible for the adults to feed the two children. When the siblings eventually return home after having killed the witch in the woods and stolen her gold and jewels, the stepmother too is dead: by slaying the uncanny witch during their time away, the tale implies, Hansel and Gretel have also rid their home of their father’s wife, who made their home uncanny because of her perceived failure to adequately care for and protect the children. Now that the witch and stepmother are dead and poverty has been replaced with riches, the Grimms tell us, “all their troubles were over, and they lived together in utmost joy” (716). The happily-ever-after of the tale is thus achieved via the reunion of the father with his children and the reestablishment of home as a space of safety and protection.

“The Tale of the Cottage,” Donoghue’s version of the Brothers Grimm’s story, is narrated from the first-person perspective of the Gretel character, described as a “slow” and “halfwit girl” (133, 136). In a reversal of parental roles that rejects the Grimms’ tale’s misogynistic depiction of the stepmother, Donoghue’s Gretel character is raised by her mother and stepfather, and it is the stepfather who advocates for abandoning the child: because of her cognitive disability, this patriarchal figure suggests, “The little one’s no earthly use not right in the head” (134). Since she presumably cannot live up to the expectations of reproductive futurism due to her disability, the girl’s future becomes precarious, even queer. Robert McRuer in fact posits that “the system of compulsory able-bodiedness, which in a sense produces disability, is thoroughly interwoven with the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces queerness,” so that compulsory able-bodiedness and heteronormativity are ultimately contingent on each other (2). Furthermore, as Ahmed notes, “For a life to count as a good life . . . it must return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining one’s futurity in terms of reaching
certain points along a life course,” such as marriage and child-rearing (Phenomenology 21). Because Donoghue’s Gretel character’s disability ostensibly renders her unable to return her parental figures’ investment in her life in these expected ways, she loses the promise of the future that normative children are invested with and instead becomes a burden that is no longer welcome in the family home.

Upon arriving at the cottage in the woods with her older brother, the girl tells us that “[w]hen door open I think mother then no. Young” (138). Although this woman, whose “[f]ace smooth like girl,” ultimately resembles neither a stereotypical witch nor mother, she initially offers the children the protection associated with home: “Woman say, Stop here with me tonight and no harm will touch you” (138). Despite the lack of biological kinship ties, the witch character here becomes a caregiver for the children and, for that night at least, promises to fulfill a maternal role. In highlighting the lack of protection that the nuclear family has afforded the child characters and establishing instead a temporary safe space with a young woman the children are not related to, Donoghue’s tale gestures toward the possibility of home built not on biological connections but rather on queer affinities. Yet while the woman provides the children with food and safe shelter, her hospitality is quickly taken advantage of by the adolescent Hansel, who repeatedly sexually harasses her. When, as the girl recounts it, “[o]ne day we baking brother walk in call her name I never heard lift her skirt behind,” the woman defends herself with a knife and forces the boy into a cage (140). After the girl frees her brother early the next morning while the woman is still asleep, she refuses to escape with him, remarking that home is no longer home and that it is “[n]ot safe anywhere,” so she prefers to “take [her] chances” by living with the woman her brother thinks is “mad” and dangerous (140, 141). It is in fact not the woman she fears but rather her own family that has disillusioned her; as she tells her brother, “[h]ome not home if mother not mother” (140). As this line implies and as “The Tale of the Cottage” as a whole suggests, traditional models of family are ultimately no less precarious than queer models. The tale thus undermines the normative constructions of home and family as reliable and lasting. Writing against this model of the family home as a beacon of stability, Donoghue never explicitly delineates the roles that her witch and Gretel characters will play for each other, but however their relationship might evolve—whether they become friends, or lovers, or like mother and daughter—the relationship holds the promise of care, support, and solidarity that the Gretel character’s parents and brother failed to provide. At the tale’s
end, the girl remains in the woods and “wait for woman to wake” (141), her future left radically open to myriad possibilities.

It is tempting to read this ending of “The Tale of the Cottage” as following the pattern of those fairy tales and stories for children that culminate not in a return to the initial home setting but in the establishment of a new, more liberating home. Jack Zipes in fact notes that the final homing in some fairy tales “involves the reconstitution of home on a new plane” and that this new home can serve a liberating function in tales that “reflect a process of struggle against all types of suppression and authoritarianism and posit various possibilities for the concrete realization of utopia” (175, 177; emphasis in original). Nonetheless, even tales whose happy endings consist of the creation of an ostensibly utopian home depict homelessness as a transitory, precarious path leading to a presumably permanent safe space at its destination, and they participate in the ideological work of determining who is invited into the home as family, and who remains too much of a stranger and, therefore, on the outside. Whether a tale showcases the return home or the creation of a new home, the intimate connection that is established between home and happily-ever-after casts home—and the kinship connections that characterize it—as a permanent and hence desirable end point of the protagonist’s journey. As such, permanence is privileged over the ephemeral, and tales that equate home with blissful stability cannot ultimately escape but rather perpetuate the heteronormative timeline which suggests that children must overcome moments of sideways growth and return to the supposedly lasting contentment of family life.

The story of the girl in “The Tale of the Cottage” in fact does not truly end at the tale’s conclusion, and we know that the home she and the woman might create together in the cottage can only be temporary, since readers have already encountered an older embodiment of the Gretel character in the collection’s previous retelling, “The Tale of the Spinster,” in which she plays the part of Rumpelstiltskin. The circumstances that lead to her leaving the cottage and becoming a spinster, however, are not revealed in Donoghue’s text, which “leaves significant gaps in characters’ lives, thus suggesting that these tales are ‘in process’ and never entirely closed” (Orme 118). Although the endings of both “The Tale of the Shoe” and “The Tale of the Cottage” gesture toward the utopian promise that nonnormative family models can hold, the narrative structure Donoghue employs never fully homes any of the tales’ characters, unhoming and unsettling them instead and calling into question normative notions of
fixed identity, belonging, and kinship while thoroughly subverting any expectations of happily-ever-after permanence. Since none of the characters are homed in an “ever after” but instead remain in continuous movement leading toward new transformations, Donoghue’s text eschews “binary figurations of identity, where new norms are set against old, feminist against patriarch, generation against generation, or even LGBTQ against heterosexual,” emphasizing instead “the individual’s involvement in contradictory discourses and irresolvable situations” (Martin 14). The radical open-endedness of Donoghue’s tales, buttressed by the narrators’ awareness “of the uncertainty of their futures and the unlikelihood of unending happiness,” necessitates “a kind of temporary forgetting” on the part of readers whose expectations of marriage plots and happy endings are consistently thwarted (Orme 128).

Perhaps it is precisely this act of forgetting demanded by Donoghue’s tales that makes it possible for these stories to speak to a queer futurity that revels in the limitless potentialities and continuous becomings of children and adults alike. Given the oppressive, exclusionary uses to which traditional conceptions of family and home are often put, we may benefit from Halberstam’s suggestion “to forget family and forget lineage and forget tradition in order to start from a new place” that is bound neither by so-called “family values” nor by straight temporality (Art 70). While Kissing the Witch gestures toward this new place and the radical possibilities engendered by forgetting, the text refrains from utopianism as it simultaneously reminds us, by rejecting closure and happy endings, that the happiness and good life affectively attached to reproductive futurism are, for better or worse, outside the reach of queer subjects whose open-ended futures “away” remain steeped in precarity. But despite (or perhaps because) of the inherent risk and uncertainty of leaving the well-trodden straight path, deviation is also accompanied by hope; as Ahmed reminds us, “The hope of changing directions is that we don’t always know where some paths may take us: risking departure from the straight and narrow makes new futures possible, which might involve going astray, getting lost, or even becoming queer” (Phenomenology 21).

For children’s literature, this hope rests on new visions of relationality untethered from the conventional scripts of home, family, and temporality that we may do well to forget. With the last lines of the last tale in Kissing the Witch, Donoghue invites us to continue the deviation from storytelling conventions that her stories embody: “This is the story you asked for. I leave it in your mouth” (228). As characters remain
unhomed and unsettled at the collection’s end, these last lines have the potential to unsettle us as readers, too: not only does *Kissing the Witch* necessitate new strategies of reading as it consistently upsets our expectations of the stories’ and characters’ trajectories, it finally crosses the dividing line between text and readers altogether by providing us with a radical aperture into which, this ending suggests, we must insert ourselves. Jennifer Orme reads these last lines as offering us the choice of what to do with the stories we have read, noting that we may “[c]hew on them, swallow them, spit them out, or pass them along with stories and kisses” (129). Or perhaps we can join the long line of storytellers in *Kissing the Witch*, assume the role of the next narrator, and tell our own stories, while being mindful of the fact that, as Elizabeth Freeman reminds us, “unbinding time and/from history means recognizing how erotic relations and the bodily acts that sustain them gum up the works of the normative structures we call family and nation, gender, race, class, and sexual identity, by changing tempos, by remixing memory and desire, by recapturing excess” (173). It is then ultimately left for us to decide whether we return to conventional scripts and provide our stories with closure by invoking home and family, or reorient ourselves toward new desires and ways of becoming that propel us toward the queer horizon.


