#Stayhome, Don't Go Out!
Reading "Fair, Brown, and Trembling" in the Time of Covid-19

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Inspired by the coronavirus outbreak and the consequent lockdown – and taking into consideration that "books, stories and plays once read for other reasons take on new identities when" read through the lens of domestic violence (Nadelhaft 244) –, this paper explores an Irish fairy tale called "Fair, Brown, and Trembling" in the hope to reflect on why home sometimes may not be a safe place for women.

In order to introduce readers to the issue at stake, the first part offers a brief overview of domestic violence and its main features. Subsequently, taking into account some recent studies and newspaper articles, it addresses the surge of domestic violence during the coronavirus lockdown highlighting its global aspect. Lastly, it points out that domestic violence is a recurring theme also in fairy tales. The second part focuses instead on Jeremiah Curtin's first transcription of the tale published in 1890 – where domestic violence involves women both as victims and perpetrators. Finally, the last section examines Deirdre Sullivan's feminist adaptation, "Sister Fair" (2017), in which home represents a sort of container where men *conserve* young women until they are ready to get married, while forced to stay at home by a *patriarchal pandemic*.

Importantly, it is appropriate to specify that this paper is the result of a recent study carried out during the spring quarantine, on the occasion of the British Association for Irish Studies (BAIS) Virtual Conference held in May 2020, and that it focuses on a fairy tale analysed in detail for the 5th edition of the Graduate Conference organised by the University of Naples "L'Orientale" in October 2019, in an article entitled "Raccontare le fiabe nel tempo: 'Fair, Brown, and Trembling', la Cenerentola irlandese".

One Question: Is Home a Safe Place?

As Dorothy Gale – portrayed by the iconic Judy Garland – says in Victor Flaming's *The Wizard of Oz* (1939): "There's no place like home", which means that home is the best place to be. However, especially in recent times, it has become clearer that home is not the best place for anyone to be because it is the main place where domestic violence occurs.

According to one of the many definitions – namely, the one published by the Home Office on the UK government website –, domestic violence refers to: "Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those … who are or have been intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. This can encompass but is not limited to the following types of

abuse: psychological, physical, sexual, financial, emotional." Although this is not a legal definition, it perfectly highlights the main features of a kind of violence that – despite concerning both men and women, children and adults –, on this occasion, will be addressed considering violence against women. Quite simply, the reason of this choice rests on the fact that women are usually depicted "as being the primary victim group" of domestic violence (Krizsán et al. 147) and on the assumption that "the 'most dangerous place' for women around the world may be at home" (Meixler). As a matter of fact, as highlighted by Sushma Kapoor in a digest published by the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre in June 2000:

> Women … are often in great danger in the place where they should be safest: within their families. For many, 'home' is where they face a regime of terror and violence at the hands of somebody close to them – somebody they should be able to trust. Those victimized suffer physically and psychologically. They are unable to make their own decisions, voice their own opinions or protect themselves … for fear of further repercussions. (1)

In other words, this study focuses "mainly on women, because they are disproportionately affected by domestic violence" (Bradbury-Jones and Isham 2047). For them, the domestic space often represents a place of nightmare where what Geraldine Terry defines as "the commonest form of violence against women" (121) occurs.

Taking into account that "violence against women tends to increase during every type of emergency, including epidemics" (World Health Organization), it is not hard to imagine that, at the time of writing, living under "social isolation measures implemented across the globe to help reduce the spread of COVID-19" (Usher 549) becomes even more complicated for women forced to stay at home with their abusers. Indeed, early at the end of March 2020, several journalists, as well as writers and scientists, pointed out that cases of domestic violence increased globally; from the Chinese province of Hubei, where "reports of domestic violence have nearly doubled since cities were put under lockdown" (Wanging), to Brazil, with a rise of 40% or 50% in the first days of lockdown (Graham Harrison et al.); from Argentina, where "at least six femicides have occurred while the country has been under the government-imposed lockdown" (Alcoba), to India, where "the National Commission for Women (NCW), which receives complaints of domestic violence from across the country, has recorded more than twofold rise in gender-based violence in the national Coronavirus lockdown period" (Deb Roy). Thereafter, mass media have widely begun to focus on this problematic issue. For instance, at the beginning of April 2020, Amanda Taub, a writer for *The New York Times*, suggested that movement restrictions imposed to limit the contagion were "making violence in homes more frequent, more severe and more dangerous." A few days later, along similar lines, Sharon O'Halloran, chief executive of Safe Ireland, worried about "women and children who knew that they were … going to be confined, full-time, with their abusers." Therefore, while, on the one hand, health officials kept saying that "home is the safest place to be while a pandemic rages outside" (Andrew), on the other, "shocking statistics [revealed] that domestic violence [was] surging since the start of the coronavirus lockdown" (Townsend). Significantly, this is not a problem that affects victims of domestic violence alone. Indeed, "the unprecedented stress of the pandemic could breed unsafety in homes where violence may not have been an issue before" (Abramson). Basically, the issue addressed regards every woman, no matter the class, ethnicity or sexuality. As a consequence, women experiencing this *double pandemic* – because "it's important to remember that domestic violence was a global pandemic long before the COVID-19

outbreak" (Bettinger-Lopez and Bro) – "have no escape from their abusers" (Kumar and Rajasekharan Nayar 1). In a nutshell, during the lockdown women found themselves "fearing the aggressor indoors and virus outside" (Higgins).

Obviously, being an important real-life issue, it is not surprising that domestic violence is a recurring theme also in literary works. As a matter of fact, according to Ruth Nadelhaft, the treatment of domestic violence in literature is a subject that "is timeless in western culture" (244). As for the fairy-tale genre, in particular, Donald Haase has observed that "popular and folk fictions of all times and places, including fairy tales, have always included violence" (1013) in all of its forms, along with domestic violence. Therefore, for many women in both real life and fiction, including some fairy-tale characters, home is not a safe place at all. To give some examples: Cinderella works as a servant in her own home; Rapunzel lives in a tower that is both her home and prison; Snow White leaves her home because the queen wants to kill her; Sleeping Beauty, in the versions by Giambattista Basile and Italo Calvino, is raped by a king while she is sleeping; and, finally, young brides are murdered and hidden in their new home by Bluebeard.

Unfortunately, just as in these well-known stories, home is not a safe place also for the protagonist of the fairy tale examined in this study: "Fair, Brown, and Trembling", the Irish Cinderella.

Staying at Home with Jealous Sisters

In order to allow a better understanding, it is first necessary to introduce the fairy tale offering some general information. Where possible, the main motifs – standard elements found in folk tales – will be indicated in square brackets with their letter-number combination and description, by referring to the motif-index created by Stith Thompson.[1]

"Fair, Brown, and Trembling" was transcribed for the first time by the American folklorist Jeremiah Curtin during the Celtic Revival.[2] Throughout his trips in the *Gaeltacht* areas in Ireland,[3] driven by his Irish roots and interest in folklore, he collected folk tales from oral sources, translated them directly from Irish with the help of local interpreters, and then published them in three collections, including *Myths and Folk-Lore of Ireland* (1890), which contains the story explored in this study. In the ATU index,[4] this fairy tale belongs to the 510A type – a subcategory of the 510 type, that of the 'Persecuted Heroine', addressed by Cristina Bacchilega in "An Introduction to the 'Innocent Persecuted Heroine' Fairy Tale" –, which indicates the tale of *Cinderella* and its variants.[5]

It is the story of three sisters [P252.2, Three sisters], Fair, Brown, and Trembling, the daughters of the king of Tir Conal, an ancient kingdom in Ireland. Fair, the eldest sister, is courted by the son of the king of Omanya, another Irish kingdom. Brown, the middle one, is a minor character. Trembling is the youngest and the most beautiful, so she is dressed with rags and is kept at home as a servant because her sisters are afraid that she might get married before them. She cannot even go to church, but on a Sunday she succeeds thanks to the help of the henwife and her cloak of darkness [D1053, Magic mantle (cloak)], who creates clothes suitable for the occasion [D1050.1, Clothes produced by magic] and gives her magical objects [D810, Magic object a gift]. However, she must respect one condition: she cannot go into the church and must run away as soon as the mass ends. And it is exactly on the threshold of the church that the son of the king of Omanya sees the mysterious woman – who is actually Trembling – and falls in love with her [N711.4, Prince sees maiden at church and is enamored]. On the third Sunday, the prince runs after Trembling and takes off one of her shoes [F823, Extraordinary shoes]

while she is running away on her mare. Hence the search for the *right foot* begins. After the shoe test, [H36.1, Slipper (shoe) test], followed by a fight between contenders, the prince and Trembling get married and have a son. But the story does not end here. Indeed, after an attempted murder by Fair, who tries to deceive the prince and take her sister's place, [K1911, The false bride (substituted bride)], Trembling is swallowed by a whale, [B17.2.1, Hostile sea-beasts]. Fortunately, after various vicissitudes, the prince manages to save his wife by shooting the magical animal, [B192, Magic animal killed]. Accordingly, once exposed, Fair is punished and abandoned at sea, and Trembling, like the well-known Cinderella, gets her happy ending, [L50, Victorious youngest daughter].

Who keeps Trembling at home in this variant of the tale are therefore her jealous sisters. Indeed, unlike Disney's Cinderella, Trembling – who is the *heroine* and the *princess* of the story, according to the scheme of the seven-character types identified by Vladimir Propp[6]– is not an orphan: she has a father, albeit absent, she does not have a stepmother, and she does not have two stepsisters, but two sisters, the only *villains* of the story. This emerges as the story begins: "Fair and Brown had new dresses, and went to church every Sunday. Trembling was kept at home to do the cooking and the work. They would not let her go out of the house at all; for she was more beautiful than the other two, and they were in dread she might marry before themselves" (Curtin 78). By examining Fair and Brown's behaviour through the lens of domestic violence, it is possible to say that it represents an example of violence manifested through psychological abuse since it is a "behaviour that is intended to intimidate … and takes the form of … confinement to the home, surveillance, … isolation, verbal aggression and constant humiliation" (Kapoor 2) as the story continues.

The one who encourages Trembling to go outside for the first time is the old henwife, who has three roles in the tale. She is the *dispatcher* because she pushes Trembling to go to mass; she is the *donor* because she gives her precious clothes, extraordinary means, and magical objects; and she is the *helper* because she assists her in her adventure. However, Trembling reveals a certain fear when the henwife suggests her to leave the house: "'How could I go?' said Trembling. 'I have no clothes good enough to wear at church; and if my sisters were to see me there, they'd kill me for going out of the house'" (Curtin 78). Importantly, this dialogue proves to be not only another example of psychological abuse, since Trembling is afraid to be harmed by her sisters, but also a case of economic abuse – which "includes acts such as the denial of funds" (Kapoor 2) – since she lives in poor conditions.

Who helps Trembling to leave the house definitively is the son of the king of Omanya, the *hero* of the tale, who saves her twice. The first time he saves her from her jealous sisters is when he visits the house of the king of Tir Conal for the shoe test and finds out that she is kept hidden in a closet. However, like other men of his time, the prince sees Trembling as an object to be conquered. As a matter of fact, he *wins* the hand of the girl he wants to marry after defeating other princes in a fierce fight as if she were a trophy: "as no others came to claim the woman, she belonged of right to the son of the king of Omanya" (Curtin 89). The second time the prince saves Trembling from a fate far worse, considering that her sister Fair tries to kill her: "One day … the two sisters went out to walk; and when they came to the seaside, the eldest pushed the youngest sister in. A great whale came and swallowed her" (89). Though this is an event that occurs outside the domestic space, it still involves two family members and can be recognised as a case of physical abuse. Indeed, it is a clear case of attempted sororicide since it involves a

woman who tries to murder her sister. Moreover, it shows that the perpetrator of violence against women is not necessarily a man, but can sometimes be another woman.

In conclusion, reading this fairy tale by taking into account the problematic issue of domestic violence it is possible to identify three different types of abuse: the psychological one, because Trembling is humiliated, treated as a servant and locked in her own home by her sisters; the economic one, because she lives in her home in a state of poverty; the physical one, because she risks dying at the hand of her sister Fair.

Staying at Home with Pitiless Men who Treat you like an Object

It is precisely Fair who is the protagonist of the feminist adaptation of the fairy tale examined here, indeed entitled "Sister Fair". Written by Deirdre Sullivan,[7] an author of young adult novels – including *Needlework* (2016), which tells the story of a girl who is a victim of domestic violence –, this version of the tale is part of *Tangleweed and Brine*. Published in 2017, it is a collection of thirteen *dark retellings* of *classic* fairy tales, which aims to reflect on the fate of young women in the stories retold, and, consequently, on women's condition nowadays. Just like Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) and Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* (1993), both published in the second half of the twentieth century, it represents an example of feminist postmodernist rewriting of fairy tales.[8]

Among other things, this adaptation presents a different development of the story compared to that of Curtin. Fair, Brown, and Trembling are still three daughters of a king. Fair is the *fair* one, full of responsibility. Brown is plump, dark-skinned, and always speaks her mind. Trembling, the youngest and loveliest, behaves strangely, suggesting that she is autistic; she is kept at home for the usual reason, but not by her sisters, who worry about her after all. Here too, a man falls in love with Fair, but when he sees Trembling, he changes his mind and chooses her in agreement with the king. Though not explicitly said, it is possible to consider that the man abuses her. Finally, one day the aggressor accidentally meets Fair who seduces him, gets physical with him, and then kills him in order to protect her defenceless sister from a cruel future.

The fact that the protagonist of the story is no longer Trembling, but her older sister, is highlighted by the use of a second-person narrative that addresses Fair by using the pronoun *you* almost two hundred times. Despite this, most of the story revolves around Trembling. From the very beginning of the tale, Sullivan defines her as the *special* sister who likes being "alone with all her thoughts most of the day" (Sullivan 55). Indeed, even if sometimes she shakes her hands and smiles, most of the time she sits alone on the ground, in a corner, touching, licking and tasting things: "she's just as quiet as a mouse. Not even as a mouse. She's like a wall. A chair. Not even human" (55). She is depicted as a thin and weak girl, and, she wears dirty and grim clothes plenty of holes not due to her sisters, but because "[s]he's happiest that way" (56).

Who keeps Trembling at home in this adaptation are her father and the rules of the patriarchal society in which she lives, according to which if the youngest sister marries first, the oldest ones are probably condemned to a spinster's life. At the beginning of the story, it is indeed specified that she cannot leave the house due to conventions of her time:

> They'll keep her in the kitchen. Till you're married, Or they should do. The way of it with girls.
> Simple counting. Ordering. A sequence.
> The first one's first. The second one is second. If the third one married first, they'd know she was the best. They wouldn't choose you. (54)

As it can be noticed, Trembling is not the only victim here, in that also Fair and Brown are constantly threatened by the presence of their younger sister. Moreover, as women, all three are victims of the society of their time, where only one fate is recognised for a woman: "You marry someone, then you get a baby and you're safe. You can't have safety, see, without a baby. That's the thing that makes it worth his while. There are other things you can give too. Soft bread and a clean house. Gentle voice, big smile" (60). From this passage in the story, in addition to the pejorative and obsolete representation of women as angels of the hearth, it explicitly surges one of the cornerstones of feminist theory, namely the issue of the objectification[9] of women. Indeed, the distinction between men as subjects and women as objects is clearly underlined as the fairy tale develops, which is confirmed by the recurring description of women as nothing more than a reproductive organ: "It's not about being sensible, or strong. It's not about being kind. It's not about the soft touch and the kind heart. Beauty and a womb. That's all you are. That's all an adder [a man] needs" (62).

Although female characters are central, also male characters play a pivotal role in the story. As for the king, though he is portrayed as an absent father who meets his daughters just for 'business', he has the power to give them away as brides to those who ask for them, as if they were his property, not considering their opinions and their happiness, even in the case of Trembling, who is forced to hide her uniqueness to fit models imposed by society. Once chosen, she is obliged to behave and dress like a *proper* woman.

> Father slaps her hands with the flat of his knife when she wisps them through the air. You can tell that things are very loud or very bright or very something for her when she does that. It is a thing she needs to make her safe. He likes her voiceless, and with quiet hands. She hums less to herself. Two eyes. Closed mouth. … Hair coiled artfully and hung with jewels. Soft red dress. (62)

As for the 'prince', paradoxically, he is the villain of this version of the story, because he chooses the women he wants and treats them without any respect, by playing with both their sentiments and bodies, as they were toys in his hands. Surprisingly, he does not have a name. Indeed, the author refers to him mainly by using the words 'man', 'he', 'snake-man', 'adder', and describes him as a danger:

> The first time that you spot him, you know that he is dangerous. Not like a rat that can be trapped and caught. More like a snake, a bright green adder sliding through the grass. You've heard of them in books, sharp, sneaky things. Their bite is poison and they know it too. He looks at you. You smile as blank as Trembling. Eyes to his forehead, in case he would transfix you with a glance. (58)

As it can be noticed in this passage, not only the man is depicted as a serpent, but he is also portrayed as a male version of Medusa, the well-known Gorgon in Greek mythology, capable of petrifying people with her eyes.[10] Meaningfully, he prefers Trembling because she is "easier to take" (55), and something suggests that he abuses her: "She comes home quiet. Hides inside a little corner by the hearth. Her shoes are gone. She has twigs in her hair" (61). Therefore, in this adaptation, it is possible to identify also an alleged case of sexual abuse, in addition to the psychological, physical and economic ones already mentioned in relation to Curtin's transcription.

For the three sisters of the story home is therefore not a safe place, but just a place where they are kept until the arrival of a man searching for a bride. Metaphorically speaking, wanting to make a comparison with the current moment in history, it could be

said that they are forced to stay at home by the *virus* of patriarchy, showing that, as many other women, they "internalized the culture of patriarchy, holding that it was their job to obey and to serve men" (Gyawali).

At the end, who saves Trembling in this retelling is her sister Fair, who despite all has always been worried about her and has always tried to protect her. Indeed, at the end of the tale, she decides to sacrifice her virgin body, turning it into a "ruined body" (65), and drown the cruel man who intends to ruin Trembling's future. Although she proves to be a strong and courageous woman who makes her choice in a world ruled by men, it is not exactly a happy ending. In all probability, it is just a temporary rescue. However, what is certain is that Fair performs a substantial act of rebellion in the hope of creating a better future in which – to put it in the words of Kapoor already quoted at the beginning of the study – women will be able to "make their own decisions, voice their own opinions or protect themselves."

One Answer: Not for Everyone!

As it has emerged from the present study, it seems that the new coronavirus and patriarchy can be ultimately considered both as a virus having a strong impact on women, who are in both cases compelled to #stayhome, as the popular hashtag suggests, and have no escape.

To conclude, going back to the question asked at the very beginning of the paper – "is home a safe place?" –, after reading this fairy tale, in both the *classic* version and its feminist adaptation, it is possible to answer by saying: "not for everyone!" Indeed, as it has been shown, for women forced to live with their abusers the domestic space represents a dangerous place to be – whether they are fairy-tale princesses locked in their houses by jealous sisters (as in "Fair, Brown, and Trembling") and pitiless fathers (as in "Sister Fair"), or real-life women obliged to stay at home with dangerous relatives in the time of Covid-19.

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Notes

1. Folklorists use the term *motif* to indicate indivisible standard narrative elements recurring in folk tales. In his six-volume index, Stith Thompson collected thousands of motifs creating a list of entries marked by a letter-number combination.
2. The Celtic Revival developed in Ireland in the second half of the nineteenth century with the aim of recovering the Gaelic past, for fear that it would disappeared "suffocated by a passive adherence, more or less imposed, to Anglo-Saxon models" (Carrassi 59).
3. The Gaelic word *Gaeltacht* refers to areas in Ireland where Irish is the main language. Curtin tells that he personally collected the tales in County Kerry, County Galway and County Donegal in 1887, in the introduction to his collection (7).

4. The ATU (Aarne-Thompson-Uther) index is a system used in folklore studies to classify folk and fairy tales. It is a catalogue of 2399 types classified in seven main categories.
5. In reference to the numerous Cinderella variants, including "Fair, Brown, and Trembling", see Cox 1-52.
6. It is a scheme of seven recurring characters, *dramatis personae*, illustrated by Propp in his study on folktales (79).
7. Deirdre Sullivan is an Irish writer who has work experiences with autistic children. She has won several awards and her collection of fairy-tale adaptations has been praised by the fairy tale scholar Jack Zipes.
8. For a complete study on adaptation theory, see Hutcheon. For a further exploration of feminist adaptations of fairy tales in the post-modern era, see Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies*.
9. See Papadaki for an analysis of this issue.
10. The use of mythological elements in Sullivan's works is recurrent, as it can be widely seen in *Needlework*, where reference is especially made to Greek and Irish mythology.

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