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## **Cover Page Footnote**

Colleen Taylor, FCRH 2012, is from Sherman, Connecticut. She is an English major, Irish studies minor, and American Catholic studies concentrator. She is currently abroad in Galway, Ireland, studying Irish literature, language, and music. Colleen plans to further her studies of Irish writers and the Irish language in graduate school.

# Writing Women's Mythology: The Poetry of Eavan Boland and Louise Erdrich

Colleen Taylor, FCRH '12

Eavan Boland and Louise Erdrich are authors who write from very different cultures. Boland's poetry explores Irish history while Erdrich's traverses Native American culture and the Catholic religion. This polarity, however, is not so crucial when compared to the two poets' striking similarities in voice and in subject. As women writers aligned with feminism, both Boland and Erdrich seek to express the female perspective and reverse centuries of women's silence, and even more strikingly, they use the same medium to do so. Mythology is their instrument of choice, with Boland exploring Celtic folklore and Erdrich Native American legend. But these poets do more than explore; they reinterpret and rewrite. Challenging androcentric myths, Boland and Erdrich give the legends of their respective cultures a female voice, thereby creating a new, female mythology. Furthermore, the similarities in their mythological poems speak to the idea of a shared female consciousness. Nevertheless, while the themes, tone, and images parallel one another, their mythological poems do not always end similarly. Erdrich seems to accomplish the liberation of women within her final stanzas, but Boland ends her poetry without freeing her woman-speaker from despair.

Award winning author Louise Erdrich was born in Little Falls, Minnesota to a German-American father and a part-French, part-Chippewa mother.<sup>1</sup> Throughout her life, Erdrich has stayed close to her Chippewa roots. At Dartmouth College, she became involved with Native American Studies, as a result virtually all of her writings engage Native American history and culture.<sup>2</sup> Erdrich successfully writes in many different genres including novels, children's literature, short stories, and poetry, and her first novel, *Love Medicine*, won her the National Book Critics Circle Award for Best Fiction.<sup>3</sup> *Baptism of Desire*, her second book of poetry, published in 1989, traverses Catholic religious themes and ideas, as well as Native American mythology. It is this book of poetry that aligns so well with Eavan Boland's work. Boland was born in Dublin in 1944 to Irish parents. The author of over fifteen collections of poetry, Boland is a highly respected Irish poet and the winner of several awards, including the Lannan Foundation Award in Poetry (Irish Writers).<sup>4</sup>

Like Erdrich, Boland is particularly in touch with her legacy. Her poetry is rooted in Irish history and often invokes an Irish woman's experience to comment on the country's tragic past and national identity. Recently (in 2005) she published a complete collection of her poetry, *New Collected Poems*. In that collection are her more recent sets of poems, including the "In A Time of Violence" (1994) poems and the "Code" (2001) poems, both of which engage Irish mythological stories to discuss women's issues. These recent collections of Boland's parallel Erdrich's *Baptism of Desire*, and it is my conviction that, together, these two sets of poems send a very powerful message.

Native American myth is steeped in the tradition of androcentrism. Although Native American religions and legends often recognize the importance of mother figures, equality for women is virtually absent in the storytelling tradition. Female figures appear in myths, but they are often depicted as "other" and are resigned to the domestic sphere.<sup>5</sup> In *A Feminist Companion to Mythology*, Mart Weigle notes that in Native American traditions, music, religions, and especially myths and legends are "controlled by men."<sup>6</sup> Of course, societal structure and beliefs differ from tribe to tribe, but, for the most part, Native American women are not storytellers.<sup>7</sup> In most Native American mythologies, the trickster takes a central role. The trickster exists, as his name suggests, to create confusion and to upset the progression of a story. He is a clever, important character and is almost always male. The trickster can bend his gender but, as Weigle notes, he is "first of all a man . . . because women are simply not accorded [that] variety of expression."<sup>8</sup> In Native American mythology, women rarely "express" themselves, and they hardly ever tell the story.

Louise Erdrich challenges the sexist mythological tradition in several of her poems, and this is most clear in "Fooling God." Erdrich, in the opening poem of her collection, *Baptism of Desire*, challenges Native American convention by creating a female trickster. The poem is a series of propositions of possible ways the speaker can hide and escape God, such as "I must become small and hide where he cannot reach" or "I must

become very large and block his sight.”<sup>9</sup> Like a true Native American trickster, the speaker of the poem attempts to fool God into believing she is not there. More importantly, however, the poem continually asserts the feminine in correlation with these attempts at deceiving God. The speaker says, “I must turn down the covers and guide him in. / I must fashion his children out of playdough, blue, pink, green. / I must pull them from between my legs.”<sup>10</sup> Erdrich is invoking the two standard, stereotypical female roles: that of sexual partner to man, and that of mother. She puts the trickster in the domestic sphere so as to assert her sex. While this domesticity may appear to comply with the sexist beliefs of Native American traditions, Erdrich combats the stereotype by putting the female trickster into action. For instance, the woman in the poem guides the male god to bed, not the other way around. More importantly, the trickster is by no means a passive object in the birthing process. Rather, she initiates the process and “pulls [the babies] from between [her] legs.”<sup>11</sup> Such exertions by the female trickster resist the belief that Native American women have no active part in legend. Moreover, the rhythmic repetition of “I”—an “I” which belongs to the female speaker—asserts women into the storytelling tradition. After all, the female trickster narrates the story of this poem. “Fooling God” transforms Native American myth into an expression of the female experience.

Irish, Celtic mythology, like Native American myth, is androcentric. There are far more heroes and male characters in Celtic mythology than there are heroines. But a select number of stories can boast of characters with feminist potential, such as Deirdre of the Sorrows. In her book, *Women, Myth, and the Feminine Principal*, Bettina L. Knapp argues that Deirdre is one of Ireland’s national heroes, and that her “inner fortitude and strength” distinguish her from other female characters in Celtic myth.<sup>12</sup> Although Deirdre’s determination is associated with being with a man, Knapp maintains that she nonetheless represents “a woman’s will for independence.”<sup>13</sup> Knapp also points out that Gráinne of “The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Gráinne” echoes Deirdre’s independence.<sup>14</sup> Fated to marry old, powerful kings, both Deirdre and Gráinne act on their desires and flee from these kings, escaping with their lovers. Like Deirdre, Gráinne reflects autonomy of choice and of action in her elopement with Diarmuid. It is important to note that ancient Celtic society was a place where women were socially independent. They were not on wholly equal footing with men but were

able to choose their professions and control their own wealth.<sup>15</sup> Husbands and wives had very similar rights, unlike in Ancient Greek and Roman societies in which the husband was in control.<sup>16</sup> Although Deirdre and Gráinne are not free from sexism, they represent a tendency toward equality for women.

In repeatedly invoking the Celts and their folklore, Boland’s poetry expresses her desire for a time when women had less prejudices to battle. Boland seems especially interested in the myth of Gráinne and Diarmuid. Her poem “Story” mentions two lovers hiding in the woods, a clear allusion to Gráinne and Diarmuid on the run from the old king Fionn Mac Cumhaill. “Story,” like “Fooling God,” highlights the woman of the legend. While tradition usually centers on the rivalry between Fionn and Diarmuid or Diarmuid’s tragic death, Boland focuses her poem on Gráinne. Early in the poem, the speaker states, “And let the woman be slender.”<sup>17</sup> She asserts the woman in the story, putting an emphasis on the word “woman,” which later recurs with the line “That this woman is growing older.”<sup>18</sup> Never does the poem address “the man.” The poem begins with “Two lovers in an Irish wood,” acknowledging Gráinne and Diarmuid’s fate together, intertwined.<sup>19</sup> But not long after, the poem imaginatively separates Gráinne from Diarmuid, and the speaker says, “I am writing a woman out of legend.”<sup>20</sup> Boland singles out Gráinne, writing her out of the traditional interpretation of the myth and transporting her into a woman’s interpretation. Like Erdrich, Boland rewrites the myth and challenges convention by accenting the woman, rather than the man.

There is a common tone that runs throughout both Erdrich’s and Boland’s poetry, a tonal quality that reflects a position of double oppression. Erdrich and Boland choose to write from oppressed cultures: those of Native Americans destroyed by New World immigrants and the Irish, and suffering from centuries of English oppression, respectively. And, as women, they write from an even greater oppression. Their poetry laments the cruelty brought on by invasion and by sexism. In an article entitled “History, Postmodernism, and Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks*,” Nancy Peterson explains Erdrich’s subjugated position: “For writers such as Erdrich, a part-Chippewa woman, the history of America has often been exclusionary—a monologic narrative of male Anglo-American progress that constructs others as people without history.”<sup>21</sup> This experience of exclusion can be heard in “Fooling God” with the relentless repetition of “I must.”<sup>22</sup> Virtually every line in the poem

begins with "I must," but rather than create monotony, the repetition manifests that subjugated position. As an "inferior" person, the speaker "must" do certain things; they are required of her. The oppression of Native Americans and of women is directly addressed in "Potchikoo's Life After Death," a myth of Erdrich's own creation. The character Josette is criticized by society for not being remorseful enough about her husband's death while Potchikoo is denied entrance into heaven because he is an "Indian."<sup>23</sup> Like Peters argues, Erdrich draws attention to an experience that is neither Anglo-American nor male, and that experience is one of injustice and ostracism.

Boland overtly addresses her twice-oppressed perspective in her essay, "The Woman The Place The Poet." She explains how she has chosen to express the tragic Irish past, saying, "We yield to our present, but we choose our past. In a defeated country like Ireland we choose it over and over again, relentlessly, obsessively."<sup>24</sup> Boland does more than choose Ireland: she chooses Irish women specifically. When she contemplates the history of the country, she imagines the poor Irish girls and wives who never had a voice. She is greatly affected by the imprisonment of Irish women in history, because "At an age when I was observing the healings of [Ireland], she [my imagined woman] would have been a scholar of its violations."<sup>25</sup> The poem "Mother Ireland" expresses the "violations" of being Irish and being female by invoking the wounded country as a woman. Mother Ireland regrets, "[My story] was different than the story told about me."<sup>26</sup> This line acknowledges how both the Irish voice and the woman's voice have been silenced throughout history. The voice Boland and Erdrich give to this position of double oppression takes on the tone of anguish. Anguish alone can communicate the exclusion and oppression suffered twice over by the women of these "defeated" cultures.

The character of the abused wife runs throughout the mythological poems of both Boland and Erdrich. In Boland's poem "Embers" (in the *Code* collection), the speaker engages with a mythical woman entrapped by standards of perfection only to realize her own husband ignores her. She reads aloud the story of the old, haggard woman of the Fianna who is first scorned by scores of men, then made young and beautiful again by the love of a man named Diarmuid. The speaker's husband will not hear the story, saying, "You are turned away. You have no interest in this."<sup>27</sup> In the myth, the old woman of the Fianna begs Diarmuid to keep her transformation a secret: "He could not say that she had

been once old and haggard."<sup>28</sup> The speaker mimics this desperate voice. She entreats her husband, "Look at me in the last, burnished light of it. / Tell me you feel the warmth still."<sup>29</sup> Distraught over her husband's disregard, the speaker assumes the same fears that the old woman of the Fianna suffered. Both are terrified of falling short of female standards of beauty. Instead of telling us the end of the myth of Diarmuid and the woman of the Fianna, the speaker gives us her own fate in the last word of the poem: "ashes." She is made into ashes, torn apart by her husband's refusal to hear her voice.

Erdrich's myth about Potchikoo is written in prose-like narrative, rather than in verse like Boland's "Embers," but it is nevertheless a powerful story of an abused wife. In the section "Potchikoo Greets Josette," Potchikoo returns to his wife merely to quench his sexual desires. He continues to have sex with her, even though she falls asleep: "Finally Josette fell asleep, and let him go on and on."<sup>30</sup> In this moment, Josette is a completely passive, inanimate object, and like Boland's speaker in "Embers," her voice is unheard by her husband. She merely exists for Potchikoo's pleasure. What's more, directly afterward, Erdrich confronts the issue of machismo by having the adulterous Potchikoo betray Josette. While Josette is at daily Mass, Potchikoo is in the town "calling for women," a true violation of Josette's goodness and loyalty to him.<sup>31</sup> Both Boland and Erdrich use mythology to expose how husbands mistreat their wives, whether it be something as simple as the act of ignoring or something as serious as adultery. Both "Embers" and "Potchikoo's Life After Death" imply that the problems women face today are not distant from those suffered by women of the past and by women in myth.

These two poems are undoubtedly tragic, but "Potchikoo's Life After Death" and "Embers" also celebrate women. Boland and Erdrich employ mythology to convey the sacredness of woman. In "Potchikoo's Life After Death," Josette is directly associated with religion, as she is the only character who is mentioned as going to Mass. Her holiness shows through when she banishes and defeats Potchikoo's "mean twin," saying to it, "In the name of the Holy Mother of God! Depart!"<sup>32</sup> The twin obeys her, which suggests that Josette wields a divine-like power. Moreover, Josette traps the mean twin by putting "blue plaster that had fallen off the Blessed Virgin's robe" in a roasted bird—a symbolic gesture.<sup>33</sup> Something miraculous is contained within the bird just as sacred strength is contained within Josette herself. In "Embers," when the speaker reads about the old

woman of the Fianna, the audience gets the sense that the story is sacred to her. The old woman in the story is certainly magical, as she is transformed from old and haggard to young and beautiful in one night, but she is also a sacred figure for the speaker in the poem. This is why the speaker becomes utterly dejected when her husband has no interest in the story.

In an essay entitled “Beautiful Labors: Lyricism and Feminist Revisions in Eavan Boland’s Poetry,” Christy Burns argues that Eavan Boland’s poetry denies beauty. She explains that Boland openly critiques art that paints women as a symbol of beauty: “Boland grew suspicious of beauty and its romantic imagery as she began to search for her place as a woman writer.”<sup>34</sup> As a result, Burns says, Boland’s poetry replaces beauty with “the reality of everyday women’s domestic lives.”<sup>35</sup> This refusal of beauty is certainly apparent in “Embers.” The poem centers on the precariousness of woman’s youthful beauty with both the old woman of the Fianna and the speaker herself, who fears her husband no longer finds her attractive. The speaker hopelessly says “Tell me you feel the warmth still.”<sup>36</sup> She futilely asks him to feel desire for her. This same challenge of beauty permeates Boland’s poem about Gráinne and Diarmuid, “Story.” While most versions of “The Pursuit of Gráinne and Diarmuid” present Gráinne’s beauty as her key characteristic, Boland’s poem questions that beauty. The poem says, “That her [(Gráinne’s)] mouth is / cold. That this woman is growing older. / They do not know. They have no idea / how much of this...depend[s] on her to be young and beautiful.”<sup>37</sup> Boland replaces the romantic myth of Gráinne’s unparalleled beauty with the reality of aging. Instead of following convention by elaborating on Gráinne’s loveliness, Boland imagines how things will change when she begins to age, as all women age. Burns’s argument is spot on; Boland seeks to deny the myth of beauty in her poetry.

I would also argue that Burns’s idea can be extended to include Erdrich, who often rejects romanticization and beauty. In her trickster poem “Fooling God,” Erdrich turns Native American mythological traditions upside down by challenging the idealistic image of woman as mother and replaces the beautiful with the artificial. The poem’s description of giving birth is about commercialization rather than nature: “I must fashion his children out of playdough, blue, pink, green. / I must pull them from between my legs / and set them before the television.”<sup>38</sup> The act of giving birth is mechanized with these lines. The speaker’s babies are synthetic, made out of “playdough,” different from one another

only in color. Moreover, they are immediately set in front of the television, as if to suggest they are merely a product of commercialization. By taking all the beauty out of motherhood, Erdrich not only exposes the evils of our materialistic culture, but also directly challenges Native American mythology’s stereotypes about women belonging in the domestic sphere. This theme of fakeness recurs in the poem with lines such as “[perhaps] if I invoke Clare, the patron saint of television” and “flowers made of felt.”<sup>39</sup> She questions the romanticization of sainthood by associating St. Clare with commercial television and abandons natural beauty with the image of artificial flowers made of felt. This denial of beauty is not cynicism for either Erdrich or Boland. It is more likely a step toward creating a new mythology of women, a task they can only accomplish by separating their poetry from past prejudices that claim women are merely beautiful objects to be admired.

So far the parallels between Erdrich and Boland have been striking. Both clearly create a new female mythology and a unique female voice in their poetry. The striking similarities suggest a common consciousness, which, by the tone of their poetry, is one of anguish and dejection at the difficulties presented by long-standing sexism. The poems also assert the feminine perspective in Native American and Irish cultures as a sacred, cherished perspective. However, this parallelism is suspended when comparing their mythological poems’ endings. The two poets begin with the same tone, but end in contrasted ones.

Boland’s tone and voice remain static throughout the entirety of her poems. If they do change, it is only in magnification. She often doubles the voice of sorrow by having her speaker in present time echo the distresses of mythical characters. For instance, the latter half of “Story” explains how Gráinne’s sorrows and fears travel over space and time and are felt by the speaker: “[a]nd suddenly what is happening is not / What happens to the lovers in the wood...But what is whispering out of sycamores / And over river-noise...And a table at which I am writing.”<sup>40</sup> The precariousness and temporality of Gráinne’s youthful beauty is not just an issue within the myth. It resonates with the speaker in her own time as well: “I am thinking how new it is—this story. How hard it will be to tell.”<sup>41</sup> Perhaps the story is “new” because the speaker is just beginning to age and the experience of losing her youthful good looks is still fresh and poignant. Moreover, it is “new” in that it Gráinne’s dangers are modern fears; a woman losing

her looks is in a vulnerable position in modern society. That is why the story will be so hard to tell, because the speaker is hurt and scared by its implications. The poem, therefore, ends on a dejected note. Even Gráinne, who is often seen as a strong, willful female character, cannot rescue the speaker from the chains of sexist prejudices. The speaker in Boland's "Embers" expresses the same dejected concerns. The last line of the poem is, "tell me you will never speak about the ashes."<sup>42</sup> The word "ashes" clearly connotes decaying and deterioration, which are aligned with how the speaker is growing older and perhaps less interesting to her husband. While Boland makes women's voices heard, she cannot separate them from the tone of sorrow and dejection at being entrapped by society's sexism.

Erdrich, however, begins in anguish and ends in triumph. She makes heroes out of her speakers and liberates the female voice from despair. Furthermore, as a part of this liberation, "Potchikoo's Life After Death" enacts the Native American tradition of the trickster. The myth focuses on a male character, Potchikoo, and his journey after his death. However, by the last chapter of the tale, "How Josette Takes Care of It," Potchikoo is virtually erased from the storyline and replaced by Josette. In a trickster-like move, Erdrich asserts Josette as the heroine of the tale. She launches a surprise attack on sexist ideas by waiting until the end of the poem to truly reveal Josette's strength, independence, and determination. Josette is the one who finally defeats the evil spirit that is causing trouble in the town, and she burns Potchikoo's body so that the mean spirit can never return: "[it] crackled in the flames, shed sparks, and was finally reduced to a crisp of ashes, which Josette brushed carefully into a little sack, and saved in her purse."<sup>43</sup> Erdrich does not even bother giving us Potchikoo's fate. Her readers do not learn what happens to him, and yet the story does not feel incomplete. Josette triumphs, and in keeping the remains of Potchikoo's ashes in her purse, she symbolically carries proof of that triumph with her. "Potchikoo's Life After Death" ends in ashes like Boland's "Embers," but these are happy ashes, concrete proof of a woman's triumph.

Erdrich's poetry ends in a defiant way. She addresses the anguish women feel in their oppression but also makes a fool out of sexism by shockingly revealing the heroism of her women characters. Although Boland does not accomplish this level of triumph, her poetry is by no means inferior or less progressive than Erdrich's. In fact, it is appropriate that Boland ends with tragedy because that is how most Celtic myths end. Similarly,

Erdrich's poetry rightly concludes with a trickster's act, an essential part of any Native American myth. Nevertheless, while this difference is important, the two poets' similarities are what is really remarkable about this comparison. That they write from such different backgrounds and styles and yet produce such analogous poetry attests to the idea of a common female consciousness. The female voices they create are harmonious. Though the actual myths may be different, Erdrich and Boland write from the same consciousness and therefore create a universal female voice that all mythologies and all women can recognize. Finally, I would argue that Boland and Erdrich encourage their audiences to find heroines in other culture's mythologies and to create a voice for those mythical characters who have been marginalized. Eavan Boland and Louise Erdrich have lit the fire for a new mythological legacy. It is time for Diarmuid and Potchikoo to make way for Gráinne and Josette.

### Notes

- 1 "Louise Erdrich," Odyssey Editions, accessed February 27, 2011, <http://www.odysseyleditions.com/EBooks/Louise-Erdrich>.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 "Eavan Boland," Irish Writers Online: A Concise Bio-Bibliographical Dictionary of Irish Writers, <http://www.irishwriters-online.com/eavanboland.html>.
- 5 Marta Weigle, "Southwest Native American Mythology," in *The Feminist Companion to Mythology*, ed. Carolyne Larrington (London: Pandora, 1992), 354.
- 6 Weigle, "Southwest Native American Mythology," 355.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Weigle, "Southwest Native American Mythology," 352.
- 9 Louise Erdrich, "Fooling God," in *Baptism of Desire* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1989), 3.
- 10 Erdrich, "Fooling God," 3.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Bettina L. Knapp, *Women, Myth, and the Feminine Principle* (Albany: State University of New York, 1998), 179.
- 13 Knapp, *Women*, 179.
- 14 Ibid.