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Joyce Carol Oates's "Little Maggie": Southern Myth in Ballad Form and Beyond

Tanya Tromble

- 1 From the very beginning of her professional writing career,¹ Joyce Carol Oates has been fascinated with the enigma of human life, placing “the mystery of human emotions” at the heart of her fiction.² In the words of Oates critic and biographer Greg Johnson, she scrutinizes “with dogged thoroughness the moral conditions of an unstable American reality” (1). A preoccupation with metaphysical inquiry is not only present in Oates’s fiction but manifests itself in her essay and journal writing as well. The very first entry in her published journal, on January 1, 1973, gets right to the point: “Query: Does the individual exist?” (2). Various comments scattered throughout the work indicate that the mystery of what constitutes the individual and how one perceives and understands the world outside oneself are never far from her mind.³
- 2 Given this predilection for all that is mysterious about human experience, it should come as no surprise to find a reflection on the attraction of myth among those elements of the unexplainable, enigmatic “unstable American reality” she explores, especially in light of Pierre Brunel’s statement that “mythical explanation is different from scientific explanation in that it seeks to explain the unexplainable. [...] It insolently, some might say innocently, suggests itself when reason fails” (8, my translation). Similarly, this predilection also explains her career-long commitment to the short-story form which she has written about in the following way:

For me the short story is an absolutely undecipherable fact. [...] The short story is a dream verbalized, arranged in space and presented to the world, imagined as a sympathetic audience (and not, as the world really is, a busy and indifferent crowd): the dream is said to be some kind of manifestation of desire, so the short story must also represent a desire, perhaps only partly expressed, but the most interesting thing about it is its mystery. (Oates, “The Short Story” 213-14)
- 3 Gavin Cologne-Brookes concludes his 2005 study of Oates’s novels with a discussion of a group of novels he considers to be a trilogy “dealing in particular with the role of myth

and nostalgia in American life” (16): *Broke Heart Blues* (1999), *Blonde* (2000), and *Middle Age: A Romance* (2001). The first two works “are both more broadly about the power of myth and metaphor to shape lives and the consequences of too deep an immersion in what amount to individual or collective fictions” (205), consequences that can be detrimental to the individual psyche. In *Broke Heart Blues*, for example, Oates has a history teacher tell a classroom of disdainful students that “ninety-nine percent of human beings [...] persist in believing in fairy tales and ‘myths’ while one percent ‘reason, analyze, come to independent conclusions’” (qtd. in Cologne-Brookes 208). “*Middle Age*, in contrast, shows more pointedly the value, possibly the necessity, of myth making in helping individuals to shape and reshape their lives” (Cologne-Brookes 205).

- 4 Oates continues this reflection in two short stories first published in 2003 and 2004, respectively: “The Haunting” and “Little Maggie—A Mystery.” Both stories make use of the traditional Southern Appalachian ballad *Little Maggie* and its eponymous mythical heroine as a means to explore aspects of myth in contemporary society, particularly as this relates to a predilection to idolize singers and their subject matter. Whereas the novels are adult views on mythmaking processes, the two later stories are both narrated by neglected daughters of singers aligned with myth. In this way, Oates deftly shifts the focus of the discussion from an exposition of cultural involvement in mass mythmaking delusions among adults to one of its more sinister aspects, namely an exploration of the negative effects this collective tendency might have on innocent young people. Through the compression required by what she has called this “notoriously difficult genre” (Oates, *Preface* 830), she uses the short-story to focus on one elemental human experience, notably the perpetuation of violence and its effects on vulnerable women and children, in two stories that tell of men victimizing women who go on to victimize their children.

***Little Maggie*, The Traditional Ballad**

- 5 Oates’s story “Little Maggie—A Mystery” is part of a project in which two American Studies professors at Princeton University, Sean Wilentz and Greil Marcus, invited artists “to create something new about an American ballad⁴ of their choosing” in the hope “to unlock some of the deeper mysteries of these songs.” The creations, mostly in the form of stories, are collected in the volume *The Rose & The Briar: Death, Love and Liberty in the American Ballad* (3).
- 6 In Oates’s story, Blue-Eyed Bill Brandy’s song “Little Maggie” originates with him. However, the traditional *Little Maggie* ballad upon which Oates based her story predates the time frame of the story though its precise origins are unclear. Wilentz explains: “Given its themes of liquor and thwarted love, and given the Gaelic associations of the nickname ‘Maggie,’ it seems a fair guess that the song has Scots-Irish origins, and that it first flourished, in its many versions, in the Southern American backcountry of which the mythical Vergennes County, Kentucky, was and is a part” (364). The *Smithsonian Folkways* website is more specific, identifying the ballad as belonging to the “unique oral traditions of the Blue Ridge Mountain back-country region.”⁵ The Blue Ridge Mountains are located in the Southern Appalachians, extending northeast from northern Georgia up through North Carolina and Virginia to Southern Pennsylvania. First recorded in 1927 by Grayson and Whitter (Wilentz and Marcus 365), “Little

Maggie” has been performed by numerous artists over the years, including Bob Dylan, to whom Oates dedicated her famous story “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been.” Wilentz explains that “most variants of the song tell the same story—of a beautiful, elusive, and somewhat sinister Maggie, who is standing over yonder, drinking and sparking with someone other than the adoring singer” (364). In subsequent verses, Maggie is observed sitting alone with a gun and a musical instrument as the singer takes suitcase in hand and prepares to put as much distance between them as possible. Sean Wilentz suggests the Stanley Brothers’ 1947 recording of “Little Maggie” to be a good representative of the ballad:⁶

Over yonder stands little Maggie
 With a dram glass in her hand
 She’s drinkin’ away her trouble
 And a courting some other man
 Oh how can I ever stand it
 To see them two blue eyes
 A shining in the moonlight
 Like two diamonds in the sky
 Pretty flowers were made for blooming
 Pretty stars were made to shine
 Pretty women were made for loving
 Little Maggie was made for mine
 Last time I saw little Maggie
 She was sitting on the banks of the sea
 With a forty-four around her
 And a banjo on her knee
 I’m a goin’ down to the station
 With my suitcase in my hand
 I’m a goin’ to leave this country
 I’m a goin’ to some far distant land
 Go away, go away little Maggie
 Go and do the best you can
 I’ll get me another woman
 You can get you another man. (364-65)

- 7 Marcus, in the “envoi” to *The Rose & The Briar*, claims that “in their writing, you can hear a moment every contributor to this book seems to have passed through: that moment when he or she realized that the old ballads carried a kind of truth, or, in the art historian T. J. Clark’s phrase, a kind of collective vehemence that is its own truth, that could not be found anywhere else.” When you play a ballad, he continues, “you realize that all ballads, regardless of when they might have been made, are old, and draw what power they have from a faith that just as the songs they turn back to seem to have been sung forever, they will be, too” (354). Though the editors do not specifically speak of myth or mythmaking, the notions of powerful faith and timeless collective truth alluded to in their discussion of ballads certainly tie in to the concept of myth as discussed by Mircea Eliade when he explains that the mythmaking process occurs because “popular memory has great difficulty retaining ‘specific’ events and ‘authentic’ personalities. It operates according to different structures: *categories* as opposed to *events*, *archetypes* rather than *historic personalities*” (59, my translation).
- 8 Regis Boyer suggests that a myth is always composed of three elements: a symbolic image; an exemplary, paradigmatic story; and atemporal value (153-54). Posited in these terms, the myth of Little Maggie is at heart that of the lone female temptress who mocks expressions of love, thus embodying the patriarchal fear of that which is dark

and sinister in the female. In both “The Haunting” and “Little Maggie—A Mystery,” Oates explores variations on the myth and its effect on the lives it touches to reveal the competing, yet complimentary implications of mythmaking processes.

“The Haunting”

- 9 Set in what we understand to be Cleveland as it is described as “a big city” on the banks of the Cuyahoga river (98, 95), “The Haunting”⁷ recounts a six-year-old girl’s experience of moving to a new place with her mother and older brother after her father’s death. Marybeth, the young narrator, is haunted by her father’s death and transposes her feelings onto imagined cries for help from suffering rabbits caged in the cellar of her new home. The cages are eventually removed by the landlord, but Marybeth is not released from her dread. She seems to know that the sound will continue to haunt her throughout her life: “Cries of trapped creatures who have suffered, who have died, who await us in hell, our kin” (110). Marybeth’s mother remains obstinately oblivious, however, to her daughter’s turmoil, latching on to the myth of Little Maggie to recreate herself and thus abandoning her daughter to her emotional fate.
- 10 Before the move, the mother had been suspected of involvement in the fire that burned the father alive in his bed, but was not arrested for lack of evidence. Various elements of the narrative seem to point to her guilt, however. First, the young Marybeth remembers her mother leaving the house the night of her father’s death, although she is brought to doubt this memory in the face of her mother’s and brother’s assertions: “The man drove away with Mommy and later I would come to think that I had dreamed it because Mommy said she had not left the house, not for five minutes, she swore *she had not*. [...] Calvin told them Mommy was with us all night” (99). In addition, Marybeth remembers always having “to look out for” Daddy because the man could be unpredictably violent and didn’t hesitate to beat on his children (97-98). At such times “Daddy’s eyes were glassy and had red cobwebs in them and his fingers kept bunching into fists and his fists kept striking out like he couldn’t help himself. [...] And Mommy ran to protect us then and hid us” (98). Physical abuse could provide a motive for murder. Before moving, the mother apparently sustained significant injuries to her face which is still, months later, only “mostly mended” (103). The final element is not in the narrative’s content, but rather in its structure. The clues are to be found on the penultimate page on each side of a section break where the last paragraph of one section begins with a description of the mother “lighting a match” for her cigarette and the following section, which recounts the little Marybeth knows of her father’s death, begins with the words “burned alive” (109). This juxtaposition of fire-related anecdotes encourages the establishment of a connection between the two events.
- 11 The mother may have reacted in order to protect herself and her children, however, she is not a pure and faultless character. Indeed, her singing of the *Little Maggie* ballad in her new home seems to be a sign of danger as it is associated with other former behaviors of the violent father that she is gradually adopting: “Now Daddy is gone, Mommy plays his old music”; “Now Daddy is gone, Mommy brings home bottles like Daddy used to bring home”; “Now Daddy is gone and not coming back, Mommy has taken up his old guitar that none of us could touch, not ever” (102). Now that the father is gone, the mother is taking his place, including adopting his negative qualities, and the children become wary of her as they used to be of him: “But now Daddy is gone, it’s

Mommy whose eyes are like a cat's eyes jumping at us. It's Mommy whose fingers twitch like they want to be fists" (98).

- 12 The victim status of the mother is further called into question by her alliance with the Little Maggie character whose traditional portrayal as sinister and dangerous is reinforced in this story by the modified ballad lyrics. Versions of the ballad have traditionally referred to Little Maggie as "courting" some other man, but the lyrics sung by Marybeth's mother in "The Haunting" refer to Maggie as "cheatin' another man" (103). Indeed, this combined with the fact that Marybeth remembers her mother driving away with a man on the night of her father's death indicates that the mother had a motive other than that of her children's well-being for wanting her estranged husband dead. Furthermore, in the story's version of the ballad, it is Maggie who is described suitcase in hand, rather than the singer—who packs up and leaves—in traditional versions. This implies that Maggie/the mother has something from which to run.
- 13 By the end of the story, any innocence that could be associated with the mother is completely occulted by her decision to adopt the mythical persona. She decides to call herself "Little Maggie" at the river café where she works and performs. In her drinking, flirting (taking money from men but offering nothing in return), guitar playing and gun (or match) slinging, Marybeth's mother almost perfectly embodies the mythical Maggie figure. She uses the strong, independent, deadly yet sexy Little Maggie character as a tool to help reposition herself as a figure of power and authority now that her husband is out of the picture and the silence that reigns in the café—once she starts to sing—can be taken as proof of her success (107). "The Haunting" thus recounts a story of female empowerment through myth adaptation and perpetuation. Indeed, by calling herself Little Maggie, and singing about her own mythical persona, the woman in this story effectively controls the way in which she will be perceived and understood by others. Myth-making, explains Eliade, is a process by which "the memory of historical events and authentic individuals is modified within two or three centuries to fit the mold of archaic mentality which cannot accept the *individual* but only the *exemplary*" (60, my translation). By aligning herself with an exemplary model, Marybeth's mother uses the power of myth to mask her questionable past as well as her problems at home. Indeed, she seems oblivious to the problems of her own daughter who is tormented by her own brother and sleep-deprived due to haunting feelings associated with the terror of trapped, suffering creatures.

"Little Maggie—A Mystery"

- 14 In "The Haunting," Marybeth's mother aligns herself with an existing mythical persona. In the later "Little Maggie—A Mystery,"⁸ however, Oates inversely treats the mythmaking process itself, suggesting that in our contemporary celebrity-crazed culture, the process is accelerated, happening almost instantaneously, as opposed to over the centuries, or at least generations, discussed by Eliade (60-62). Two complementary examples of this are showcased in this story: the artist as singing legend and his subject matter as representative of a privileged position. The two are intricately linked as Bill Brandy's fame is associated from the start with the song "Little Maggie" which remains one of his most popular. The former element is concerned with the reality behind the singer's celebrity façade, unveiling the un-Christian behavior

behind his god-fearing rhetoric and demasking the artifice that seeks to deny the man's aging body and conform as nearly as possible to his popular image.⁹ Indeed, nearing the end of his career, the singing "legend" has to undergo plastic surgery and wear corsets and heeled boots in order to live up to his mythical image (115). More interesting, however, is the latter element constructed around the myth of Little Maggie which is concerned not only with the relationship between myth and reality, but also complicates the boundary between the fictional world and the real world.

- 15 Set in fictional Vergennes County, Kentucky, Oates's story is the tale of a country singer's rise to national fame and the havoc it wreaked upon his wife and children, as told by his daughter, Lucinda. Unable to deal with their feelings of abandonment, his estranged wife dies relatively young of drink and despair, and his son commits suicide while still a young man. The mystery alluded to in the title has to do with the identity of "Little Maggie," a character in one of Blue-Eyed Bill Brandy's most famous songs who is a source of speculation on the part of fans, journalists and family members throughout his career for the singer refuses to reveal whether or not his Little Maggie is based on a real person and if so, who this person is. Lucinda reveals that she has discovered the truth about Maggie's identity thanks to a fortuitous combination of events—photos discovered in her father's sock drawer as a child put together with a face at her mother's funeral decades later—but that she plans to keep the secret, which she presumably does until deciding to tell her story as an elderly woman.
- 16 Lucinda's narrative is presented as being for the benefit of "gullible" journalists who have put foolish questions to her about the identity of Little Maggie, suggesting she might have been the model for the character, even though she was only three years old when she first heard her father perform the song. The narrative is a confession of sorts. Though Lucinda has done nothing wrong, she does possess information, which she reveals in her own way. Lucinda has been estranged from her father for sixty years and must think back to herself at age three in order to begin the story from its beginning. Objectivity, in such a situation, is ostensibly impossible and Lucinda's narrative is clearly overshadowed by the tragic knowledge she would come to acquire related to Maggie's identity and her father's fame. The opening line evokes the distancing and mythologizing language of fairy tales: "This was a long-ago time when we were all so young." It is a time of innocence, a time of "before": "You wanted to think Little Maggie was not a real woman, to cause real hurt and regret. You wanted to think, *It's just a song, it's music fading in the air*" (101). According to this logic, if Little Maggie were but an archetype, she could not do individual, real-world harm. The irony is, of course, that had the affair not happened, the song itself would have been enough to create the marital problems between Lucinda's parents simply because of the fame it engendered. It was Bill Brandy's career that took him away from his family, not the short-lived affair he immortalized in song.
- 17 Lucinda comments on the first time she saw her father perform onstage, remembering: "Little Maggie, Little Maggie!—there was not a girl or a woman of any age in that Vergennes County audience didn't want to be Little Maggie sung of by Blue-Eyed Bill Brandy for you could see, whoever Little Maggie was, she'd got inside that man's head." This memory exposes the mass delusion that is instantly formed around the personality of Little Maggie and the notion that the detached, lonely, marginal woman of the song is somehow an enviable position, and the extension of this logic to the idea that anything that gets one sung about, thus immortalized, is enviable, an idea expressed in

Lucinda's comment directly following this memory: "Little Maggie had a song sung of her which would come to be a famous song, which will not be true of the remainder of us" (103). Bill Brandy is presented as having made "six recordings of 'Little Maggie' each of them differing considerably from the others except the opening words *Yonder stands Little Maggie*" (109). Contrary to what is generally considered healthy, her most defining characteristics then are that she is distant and alone. Yet the image continues to be attractive to Bill's adoring public even as his career charges into "a new era": "He had a Little Maggie for the new music, too. This Little Maggie was some kind of 'revolutionary'—'Free Female.' It wasn't a whiskey Little Maggie slugged back it was LSD, it wasn't a .44 pistol Little Maggie clutched but a submachine gun aimed at your heart, America!" (112). In this way, Oates evokes the evolution and adaptability of the Little Maggie myth and the notion that it hits on some kind of impossible yet fundamental human desire to be aloof and unfettered by the complications of human relationships.

- 18 The issues related to the myth are complicated in this story by the mystery of the real person behind it: "Every reporter, journalist, TV interviewer has asked Blue-Eyed Bill Brandy the same question: Who is Little Maggie?" (114). The singer claims not to understand the fervent interest provoked by the song, to which the "reporter says Why d'you think, Bill? Little Maggie made you famous way back in the 1930s. And here you are, country-music legend Blue-Eyed Bill, still going strong. There's some of us wondering about *her*" (114-15). In other words, is there a real woman behind the myth that should be granted a share of the fame, a woman being exploited by the male singer?
- 19 Throughout the narrative, Lucinda presents Little Maggie as the source of her family's problems. However, though both parts of the name are consistently capitalized and never rendered in italics or between quotation marks, it is difficult to know whether she is signalling out the individual identity behind the name, the eponymous song itself, or the mythical identity created by the song. Lucinda's discovery of the true identity behind the myth reveals the Little Maggie she constantly evokes to be a combination of the three, for the fame engendered by the popular song is shown to be more sinister than the rather pathetic actual woman. Indeed, contrary to the romantic notion associated with the woman in the ballad, Midge Kilfeather, a distant cousin of her mother's, is neither a woman to be envied nor feared. Rather, she is an embarrassment to her family: a crude, dirty, ravaged alcoholic convicted as a young woman "of smothering her own baby-born-out-of-wedlock."¹⁰ At first glance, Midge Kilfeather seems a far cry from her mythical counterpart. She is no longer young, and certainly not attractive: "Little Maggie! My Daddy had made so much of her!" (120). However, the story's message cannot be simplified to the platitude that a song, recounting an image frozen in time, cannot possibly correlate with the progression of real-world time. Indeed, upon further reflection, Midge's description does indeed correspond largely to that in the song of a dangerous, solitary alcoholic, it simply lacks the veneer of glamor that fame provides. The lyrics attributed to the ballad in this story are modified similarly to those in "The Haunting." Rather than the "courting" of traditional versions and the "cheating" of "The Haunting," this version speaks of a similarly calculating "fooling." Once again, Little Maggie is the one with the suitcase rather than the singer,¹¹ suggesting that Midge has something to run from. With these lyrics, the singer seems to be implying that Midge is wholly responsible for the child's death and her subsequent imprisonment; he was under the influence of her feminine

wiles and is therefore released of any responsibility, a victim rather than an accomplice.

- 20 The narrator, Lucinda, is a characteristic Oates protagonist in that she embodies the paradox of individuals who have both blindness and insight, a frequent Oates technique (Cologne-Brookes 219). She gains insight into Little Maggie and her family tragedy and questions the blind faith of her mother and relatives, yet remains blind to her own idolization of her father. Lucinda presents herself throughout the text as a sane and relatively objective narrator. She does not founder in shame like her mother who alternately drinks and prays herself to death, or hate like her brother who commits suicide. Indeed, she claims to have outlived her brother by so many years because she “never hated Daddy like [he] did” (108). Furthermore, she appears to coherently grasp the tragedy behind the story of Little Maggie when she writes: “*Yonder stands* is a joke to me now. The kind you try to laugh at but can’t” (121).
- 21 However, it is the short final two-paragraph section that casts doubt on this presentation. Lucinda is a traditionally Southern obedient daughter.¹² She never marries, staying home to look after her mother. In spite of her father’s neglect, she keeps his secret for over sixty years. Though her narrative reveals the secret, she continues to play the role of dutiful daughter by keeping alive a blind faith in the man. Her filial devotion is countered by the image of her father as another instance of grotesque mockery of myth. At the story’s close, though she has had no word from her father in sixty years, she remains faithful, triumphantly “confident that in Daddy’s heart he loves his angel-girl Lucinda” (122), a reference to her father’s tearful on-stage presentation of her at the age of three (105). At the same time, her father lies sequestered in his Nashville mansion, “tended to by round-the-clock nurses sworn to secrecy” (121), for all intents and purposes oblivious to his daughter. The story thus closes on the image of an elderly woman mentally stuck in the distant past as if her sixty-plus years of experience have taught her nothing. Lucinda clearly idolizes the privileged father-daughter relationship she imagines to have existed at a moment in time in which, ironically, we understand that her father had already had his affair with “Little Maggie” because, as Lucinda remembers, his performance of the eponymous song drew an overwhelming positive response from the audience.
- 22 In this story, Oates deconstructs mythmaking processes by showing the tumult and artifice underneath the veneer: the mythical Maggie is in reality a ruined woman, the celebrity singer is no longer natural but a grotesque hodgepodge of artifice, the nice church-going manners of Lucinda’s mother are shown to be nothing but facade, even the “enlightened” daughter is shown to suffer from the myth of her own independence and intellectual analysis. Yet, the interplay of fiction and the outside world creates a unique twist in terms of the reading of this story. For the purposes of her story, Oates pretends the song originates with her character.¹³ The fictitious Little Maggie is thus almost instantaneously elevated to mythical status. However, the reader, especially that of the anthology, knows the song actually exists outside the story and may have already been familiar with it. The actual song potentially resonates with the reader, thus falsifying in a way the instantaneity of the mythmaking process depicted by Oates. On the other hand, if the reader has been enthralled by the song before reading the story, this lends credence to the power of the myth it evokes. The mystery of Little Maggie evoked by the story’s title is threefold. Literally, it is the identity of the woman sung about by the legend around which the plot unfolds. Metaphysically, it provokes

reflection on two related questions: Why is the lonely Little Maggie depicted in the song such an attractive character?; and Why do we court fame to the detriment of our close personal relationships? Questions that the concision of the short-story form allows Oates to raise, yet prevents her from answering.

- 23 The fact that Oates does not furnish a complete version of the ballad in either of these stories and slightly modifies the traditional lyrics allows for the creation of a more authentic link with the fluidity of ballad tradition. Indeed, traditionally, ballad lyrics changed frequently when passed by word of mouth.¹⁴ In their introduction to *The Rose & The Briar*, Wilentz and Greil justify their ballad rewriting project, explaining: “The folklorists’ work, invaluable as it is in establishing provenances and cultural connections, can take us only so far in understanding the life of any song. Something ineffable is always missing about the emotional or historical or visual or aural experience of singing or hearing a ballad” (3). It is this “something ineffable” that they invited artists to explore and that Oates masterfully shapes into a powerful exposé of the flip-sides of mythmaking processes.
- 24 These two variations on the myth of the enigmatic Little Maggie explore the powerful masking quality of myth, deconstructing, or one might say demasking, the attractive fictionality of a device which is natural, but potentially dangerous when not understood. In her essay “On Fiction in Fact,” Oates writes: “Where myth and truth contend, where the ‘rounding of corners to make a better narrative’ and facts are at odds, we must learn to make our way as skeptics” (79). In contemporary society, the ruling mythology is often intricately linked to celebrity, popular culture and mediatization. It is fitting that Oates has chosen a song as the means to continue her exploration of this subject and that she does so in a fictional form that is also short. On the one hand, the natural elasticity of the ballad form parallels the melioristic notion championed by Oates that change is possible amongst individuals.¹⁵ On the other hand, standardized imagery, such as that transmitted by popular songs, is contrary to Oates’s conception of her art. Indeed, inversely to the interests of myth, Joyce Carol Oates is particularly concerned with the individuality of human experience in all its complexity. The short-story form allows Oates to create a glimpse of the mysterious dream-like reality with which her unique characters are confronted: The painful individuality of Oates’s two daughter-narrators thus contrasts with the timelessness of myth in these stories, exposing two competing aspects of our humanity and serving as a plea for vulnerable daughters gasping for breath in a sea of contemporary mythmaking.

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NOTES

1. The story "In the Old World" was selected as co-winner of the *Mademoiselle* College Fiction Competition and printed in the August 1959 issue.

2. The page including the biographical blurb in the paperback Fawcett Crest edition of her first book-length publication, the short story collection *By The North Gate* (1963), quotes Oates herself: "All of my writing is about the mystery of human emotions.
3. More recent remarks made in a short article for *The Guardian* indicate that this subject is no less important to Oates today: "Recall that D. H. Lawrence warned us to trust the tale, not the teller—the teller of fictions is likely to be a liar. Darwinian evolutionary psychology suggests that none of us really knows what has made us what we are, still less why we behave so eccentrically as we do; when we are pressed to explain ourselves, we invent.
4. The editors of this anthology adopt a broad definition of "ballad": "any narrative song, no matter its stanza structure" (3).
5. "Ballads and Songs of the Blue Ridge Mountains: Persistence and Change." *Smithsonian Folkways* 5 June 2013 Web.
6. A recording is available on *YouTube*.
7. "The Haunting" was originally published in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, 2003. Reprinted in *The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror*, 2004. Reprinted in *The Female of the Species*, 2005. References in this paper are taken from the latter.
8. "Little Maggie: A Mystery" was originally published in *Boulevard* in 2004, collected in *The Rose & The Briar*, 2005. References in this paper are taken from the latter. The title in the magazine version uses a colon, whereas the title in the later collected volume uses a dash.
9. Aside from the fact that the ballad of Little Maggie can be traced to the Blue Ridge Mountains, one might wonder why Oates moved farther south to find the setting for this story given that Southern backdrops are largely absent from her fiction. The religious dimension of the story may furnish a response. Indeed, the exploration of the hypocrisy behind the characters' religious rhetoric is an equally important component of the story. While exposing the grotesque tragedy of the Maggie myth in this story, Oates sets up a parallel commentary on an even more prevalent myth, that of Christian belief (see Tromble).
10. Blue-Eyed Bill Brandy seems to have immortalized this incident in song as well: "an early hit single was 'Smotherin Love' (a woman condemned to death for infanticide)" (114).
11. The song content as remembered in the story by Lucinda goes: "Little Maggie has a drink in her hand she's drinking away her troubles, Little Maggie has a suitcase in her hand she's running away from her troubles, Little Maggie has a .44 pistol in her hand she's gonna shoot away her troubles. Little Maggie is a female not to be trusted, fooling another man" (103).
12. Other traditional images of families in the South are at work in the story such as notions of patriarchal duty and a twisted form of family loyalty. For example, Bill Brandy, in spite of his neglect and philandering, purchased and continued to finance his family's home and never remarried so that, at the story's close, we learn that Lucinda is his sole remaining heir.
13. The narrative never explicitly claims that the character Bill Brandy wrote the song "Little Maggie." However, this seems to be the intention implied when Lucinda calls it "his special song" (103) and when the reporter mentions it as being responsible for his fame (114-15).
14. In their introduction to *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, John A. and Alan Lomax mention some ballads of which as many as three hundred different versions have been collected.
15. For an in-depth discussion of Oates as a meliorist, see Cologne-Brookes, particularly his introduction.

ABSTRACTS

En 2005, la nouvelle « Little Maggie—A Mystery » paraît dans le recueil *The Rose & The Briar: Death, Love and Liberty in the American Ballad*. « Little Maggie » est une chanson folk du sud des Appalaches qui date probablement de la fin du XIX^e et qui raconte l'histoire d'une briseuse de cœur qui aime boire et s'amuser. La nouvelle de Oates retrace le succès fulgurant du chanteur de country Blue-Eyed Bill Brandy, du mythique comté de Vergennes dans le Kentucky, et ses conséquences sur la famille qu'il délaisse. « Little Maggie », la chanson la plus populaire du répertoire de Bill, invite les fans à tenter d'identifier la personne qui a inspiré le personnage. On apprend que la fille de Bill a résolu l'énigme. Cependant, l'aboutissement de son enquête ne lui fournit pas la paix recherchée. Cet article examine le mystère de ce chanteur énigmatique, son rôle dans l'économie de la nouvelle, ainsi que la notion de perpétuation du mythe à travers son utilisation dans un autre texte, « The Haunting ».

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