The Irish novelist and storyteller George Moore has a priest in one of his short stories maintaining that “The Irish find poetry in other things than sex”.¹ Whatever he may have thought about this Catholic view, Moore himself, well versed not only in the late nineteenth-century Continental literary tradition but also, if more indirectly, in the native Irish one, was well aware that when it comes to poetry and particularly that in their own language, the Irish have never been averse to the frank treatment of matters sexual and erotic. Indeed, the medieval Irish classic epic Táin Bó Cuailnge, in which the redoubtable Queen Medb of Connaught promises, in Thomas Kinsella’s translation, her “own friendly thighs on top of” more material rewards in return for the loan of that desirable Irish bull around which the whole cattle-raid story pivots, is a conventional mixture of prose and poetry, and therefore does not strictly fall within the parameters of this present volume. But one of the most famous poems in the canon of Irish literature is the highly erotic vision poem The Midnight Court (Cúirt an Mheon-Oíche, c. 1780) by Brian Merriman (?1745-1805).²

The literary history of Ireland is a bilingual one, and after a dip during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some of its most celebrated

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living poets now once again write in the Irish language. Obviously, they need translations of their work into English in order to become accessible to a wider public, even within Ireland. It may be of interest, therefore, to look in some detail at a handful of poems by one of the major Irish poets of the present day, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill. Born of Irish parents in Lancashire in 1952, but brought up in Irish-speaking West Kerry and Tipperary, and educated at University College, Cork, where she studied English and Irish, Ní Dhomhnaill is now one of the best-known poets in the Irish language. In this essay, I will look at a handful of poems from the bilingual collection *Pharaoh’s Daughter*, in order to note how the poet’s Irish texts have been rendered into English by a variety of other poets, and in particular how the originals and the translations correspond as well as differ in their erotic charge.

To give readers who are not familiar with Ní Dhomhnaill’s work an impression of her poetry, here is the first poem I intend to discuss, “Oileán”, both in Irish and in English:

*Ní Dhomhnaill, Pharaoh’s Daughter, Loughcrew, Oldcastle, Co. Meath, 1990; selected poems in Irish with English translations by thirteen Irish poets, including Michael Hartnett, Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Medbh McGuckian, Derek Mahon, John Montague and Paul Muldoon.*