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**Transformation of woman through a feminist lens in *The World's Wife* by Carol Ann Duffy**

**Proměna ženy z pohledu feminismu ve sbírce básní *The World's Wife* od Carol Ann Duffy**

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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I have no objections to the BA thesis being borrowed and used to study purposes.

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## Chapter 1 - Introduction

### 1.1 *The World's Wife* in context of Carol Ann Duffy's poetry

“Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement.”<sup>1</sup> These words of Hélène Cixous in her revolutionary work “The Laugh of the Medusa” reveal what Carol Ann Duffy does with her poetry collection *The World's Wife*. The former Poet Laureate puts forgotten, or even erased women from history into her poetry and in doing so, centres the narrative on female characters and returns them to the world. By taking apart and then rebuilding ancient myths, fairytales, biblical stories, or figures from medieval and contemporary history, she offers the audience a new perspective, one with a woman as its focus. Poetic language is utilized as a subversive tool, as voice is given to those who were continuously silenced for centuries. Carol Ann Duffy retrieves the woman, the wife, from the shadow of a man and pushes her to the forefront, where she will be heard. These female figures are no longer defined by the words of men, but rather, they narrate their own being and place themselves into the course of history.

*The World's Wife*, first published in 1999, is Carol Ann Duffy's fifth poetry collection but the first one that contains poems pertaining to a unified theme – feminist re-tellings of popular stories. This volume of her poetry is a thematic extension of her previous works which also employ a heavy focus on the ones usually covered by the shadows. Born in Glasgow, but having moved to England at a young age, Duffy experienced on her own skin the feeling of being on the margins. This notion of uncovering stories of the unheard, whether it is the notion of immigration and the stances of the English towards it, or the topic of motherhood in its full

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<sup>1</sup> Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 875.

complexity, is still central to her work. Jane Dowson characterized Duffy's poetry as being able to

pinpoint our desire to shape ourselves from within rather than according to the scripts of others [...] Her poems accommodate the irrational aspects of experience that manifest in cultural myths and individual dreams. They nurture our dual sense of being unique and of wishing to identify with others.<sup>2</sup>

In *The World's Wife*, as in her other poetry collections, universal experiences are intertwined with probing of the human psyche and the varied emotional states that occur in everyday situations. Focus on ordinary life with its mundane moments is transformed by the use of contemporary language and Duffy's quick wit into a resonant poetry for the modern age.

Carol Ann Duffy's popularity and critical recognition led to her appointment as the Poet Laureate in 2009. She became the first, and to date the only, woman to hold the position in the history of this office which dates back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In an interview for *The Guardian*, Duffy says: "I don't think the poet laureate is the 'best poet', I think the poet laureate is a representative poet."<sup>3</sup> Her nomination, as the first female and also openly gay poet, is then perhaps representative of the changing climate in Britain – readers were more than ready to welcome a different voice, a voice that would represent the previously unheard part of population. Even though she does not necessarily think of herself as an activist, her poetry, especially the examined collection *The World's Wife*, is full of political and cultural ideas that can be viewed as subversive to the traditional views of the patriarchal society today. Anne Varty connects the theme of exclusion from the narrative present in *The World's Wife* with Duffy's previous exclusion from the nomination for the office of Poet Laureate based on her sexual

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<sup>2</sup> Jane Dowson, "Poet for Our Times," in *Carol Ann Duffy: Poet for Our Times* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Carol Ann Duffy, "Carol Ann Duffy: 'With the evil twins of Trump and Brexit ... There was no way of not writing about that, it is just in the air'," interview by Lisa Allardice, *The Guardian*, October 27, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/oct/27/carol-ann-duffy-poet-laureate-books-interview>

orientation – she claims that “as a method of exposing historic exclusions [...] these poems target the present, and Duffy’s contemporaneous exclusion from the Laureate selection process on the grounds of her sexuality demonstrates the accuracy of their aim.”<sup>4</sup>

## 1.2 Silencing of feminine in literature

Already the title of the whole collection *The World’s Wife*, as well as the titles of the majority of the poems included, point to the idea of exclusion of individual women from the perspective. By referring to them by the word ‘wife’ or ‘Mrs ...’, their own being and human nature is eliminated as they are reduced only to their status of being married to a man (as *The Oxford English Dictionary* highlights the word ‘wife’ was “used exclusively with reference to mixed-sex marriages until the late 20th cent.”<sup>5</sup> – therefore excluding also the reference to a same-sex marriage). This singular word is loaded with meanings that reflect the patriarchal standards of the Western society and the attitude taken towards women. Throughout history, women were defined on the sole basis of the man they were standing next to – be it their fathers, brothers, distant family members, or eventually, after getting married, their husbands. It was always the women standing behind men. But Carol Ann Duffy reclaims this word. By employing the word ‘wife’ in the title, she creates an expectation that the poems would be about the relationship between a wife and a husband. But the content of the poems quickly subverts this prospect, as they are narrated solely through the voice of the woman and her voice is the only one present. The wives take full control over the narratives and by that, place themselves back into position and stories from which they were erased. The poetry therefore disrupts expectations and contests the notions and concepts with which our language is imbued.

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<sup>4</sup> Anne Varty, “Carol Ann Duffy: The edge has become the centre,” in *Women, Poetry and the Voice of a Nation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 123.

<sup>5</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “wife (n.),” March 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6834949154>.

The movement of a silenced subject to a vocal position is not done only through subversive language, but mainly through Duffy's use of mythical, historical, or literary sources and her re-telling of them. She takes the most notorious tales from the Western culture and repurposes them in order to bring the female characters to the forefront. Since classical Greco-Roman myths are so embedded in the literary consciousness, they offer a wide space for their reimagining – the changes in them become apparent almost immediately. Readers are confronted with a new, disrupting take on them and therefore confronted with new possibilities for their interpretation. In many of the poems in this collection, Duffy even inserts a woman figure into the well-known myth or legend, as women in many of them were pushed to the edge or were even made invisible. Inventing a female character for these influential stories is a way of giving them their voice back after being silenced for centuries. Since the role of women is still so conservatively assigned, there is a need for retellings of these well-known works with a female character in the centre. Because there will always be a woman in these stories, a woman that is greatly affected by the actions of men, but also greatly ignored by the narrators.

### **1.3 Aims and Objectives of the thesis**

The aim of this thesis is to examine the specific ways in which Carol Ann Duffy re-focalizes these tales through a contemporary female gaze that subverts the stances towards the position and role of women in our society. This will be achieved by close-reading and analysis of the poems – specifically, how poetic language and devices express the subversion of patriarchal literary tradition. The thesis is divided into chapters based on the women characters that Carol Ann Duffy chooses to either reinterpret or to invent and introduce them into the literary world.

In one of her reading lectures, Carol Ann Duffy says about the collection:

what I wanted to do was to take all the stories and characters that I'd loved from childhood, from my schooldays, things that had stayed with me forever and become part of my inner landscape. Made me not only the writer I am, but perhaps the person that I am. These characters and stories come from fairytale or mythologies or the movies or history or music, wherever.<sup>6</sup>

What is evident from this comment is the impact that storytelling has on one's everyday life. It creates the basis around which we construct ourselves and understand the world. The female characters whose lives Duffy decided to narrate anew were in their original tales portrayed either one-dimensionally (as loving mothers, faithful wives, innocent virgins, or deceitful witches), or they were completely obliterated, only a blank left in their place. Tillie Olsen explored this phenomenon of women being ignored in her work *Silences* (1978), suggesting that "literature has unwittingly aided the conspiracy of silence, neglect, as to the nature of women's lives and services."<sup>7</sup> The poems in *The World's Wife* seek to fill the blanks left by the forced absence of female figures, in an attempt to right the wrongs that history has committed on women.

Carol Ann Duffy not only inserts women into the centuries-old tales, but she does so in an absolutely contemporary manner, therefore destabilising temporality and rendering the myths current. By the use of poetic faculty and the boundless possibilities that this form offers, her mythical women are found in situations that may seem unconventional and even surprising for characters originating in the ancient times. The use of modern expressions makes her poetic language accessible even when she employs complex metaphors or metonymies that trail through several lines. As a result, she opens the myths and legends for further utilization and re-imagination. Duffy manages to break out of the constraining manacles of the past literary

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<sup>6</sup> Carol Ann Duffy, "Lost Lectures: Carol Ann Duffy," *Lost Lectures*, (reading lecture at The Festival of Imagination, Selfridges & Co., London, 2014), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSyii8Sp-pk&t=105s>

<sup>7</sup> Tillie Olsen, "Silences in Literature" in *Silences* (New York: Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1978), 180.

tradition and to create a feminist poetry for the future. In their monograph concerning the classical myths in regard to feminism *Laughing with Medusa: Classical Myth and Feminist Thought*, Zajko and Leonard claim that “it is precisely because women are so circumscribed by their histories that myth becomes essential for imagining a different future.”<sup>8</sup>

The methods of transformation of female characters from ancient Greco-Roman myths, fairytales, biblical or legendary stories will be examined in connection to gender theory. The feminist frame of reference will be provided by H el ene Cixous and her essay *The Laugh of the Medusa*. Although it was first published in French in 1975 and translated into English a year later by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, the text continues to present radical ideas concerning feminism, and especially, develops the notion of ‘ criture feminine’ – one of the most influential concepts created by the French feminist literary theory. It emphasizes the need for a writing that would be specifically feminine, hence writing that would be exempt from the rules and practices observed and followed in the patriarchal systems. For Cixous

a feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments; there's no other way. There's no room for her if she's not a he. If she's a her-she, it's in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the “truth” with laughter.<sup>9</sup>

This subversive element of the feminine text can be found in the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy as she dismantled the narratives ignorant towards feminine experience and then rebuilt them – transformed them by  criture feminine, constituting the feminine historical experience in the process.

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<sup>8</sup> Vanda Zajko, and Miriam Leonard, “*Laughing with Medusa: Classical Myth and Feminist Thought*,” (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2006), 5.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xww&AN=156820&lang=cs&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>9</sup> Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 888.

The title of Cixous' revolutionary essay also refers to a notorious figure from the Greek mythology – Medusa. The story of her deadly gaze survived centuries, and eventually, Medusa became a symbol of women's empowerment. "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing."<sup>10</sup> – Cixous emphasizes the silence and absence of proper feminine expression, one that would write her in her full presence, exploring and describing femininity and sexuality, not one shielding their eyes from the feminine power that resides in women, as one would avoid the gaze of Medusa. Carol Ann Duffy does not hesitate to portray all aspects of the feminine experience in its full individuality, not shying away even from the deepest desires, be they psychological or sexual. Her transformed women are not afraid to be vocal and unashamedly force the audience to look at them, but properly now, with attention to detail. That is how they can reclaim their place in history and literature – not by being narrated, but by narrating themselves.

The women in *The World's Wife* are seizing their own voices from the clutches and confinements of phallogocentric practice that silenced them by not allowing the feminine to be expressed. But the reclaimed voices of the figures from the centuries-old tales do not hold back. The speakers of the poems loudly announce their femininity and sexuality to the world. Rosemarie Tong states that "like female sexuality, feminine writing is open and multiple, varied and rhythmic, full of pleasures and, more importantly, possibilities."<sup>11</sup> So are the works of Carol Ann Duffy – her poetic language forces the readers to consider the wives, not on the basis of their husbands, but on the basis of their humanity and femininity that emerged and rose up from the limiting and constricting patriarchal narratives.

This thesis will examine the ways in which Carol Ann Duffy, using the feminine gaze, re-imagines individual legendary or mythical tales. Each chapter will focus on a specific method

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<sup>10</sup> Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 885.

<sup>11</sup> Rosemarie Tong, "Postmodern Feminism: Focus on Hélène Cixous," in *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 253.

by which the poet brings the women into the perspective. Her play on women from Greco-Roman myths will be at the centre of the next chapter, especially the way in which she makes them break away from the confinements of their stereotypical portrayal in the literary tradition. The following chapter will be directed at the absence of the feminine in the original literary materials which Carol Ann Duffy utilized. She dismantles the narratives and fills the silences with a loud voice of a woman who was previously erased from them. While the first two chapters provide an analysis of poems based mainly on Classical myths and tales, the third chapter will emphasize her re-telling of women figures emerging from legends and fairytales of medieval or early modern literary history. Analysis through close-reading will be employed to explore Duffy's poetic language and its ability to subvert the existing expectations and patriarchal traditions originating already in the times of Ancient literature. Duffy's wives are neither constrained by their husbands, nor trapped by the archetypal roles assigned to them. They are introduced to the contemporary world, a world which they force to listen to their voices.

## Chapter 2 – Woman in the centre

### 2.1 Re-focalising myths

Classical myths of the Greco-Roman Antiquity have formed the basis for many works of art throughout the whole of Western history. The tales often provide not only entertainment, but also establish moral values and ideals of conduct, as they are thought to emphasize human virtues and punish the unworthy. But the narratives often involve more subtle differences and ideas that are remembered in the popular literary consciousness. This is the case with the feminine characters that Carol Ann Duffy chose to portray in her dramatic monologues. The goddesses, witches, nymphs, and mythical women that Duffy depicts have generally a more complicated and less monochrome background that has been forgotten throughout the centuries. These complications and nuances that appear already in the original sources, form the ground on which these poems are built. Based on the idea of Julie Sanders that if the writer reinterprets the source material with a political or ethical aim it is a case of literary appropriation<sup>12</sup>, Duffy's work in *The World's Wife* can be also categorized as such – she interprets classical myths from a feminist outlook. She not only re-focalizes the myths by having the female characters as the speakers of the poem, but also disassembles the patriarchal language in which these tales have been narrated in the previous renditions of the myths. This chapter will provide an analysis of six poems in which Duffy disrupts the conventionalized views that are associated with these characters – they are typically remembered based only on their one action or relationship with a hero, but the poems build on this and provide a rendering that would also probe the psychology of the heroines.

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<sup>12</sup> Julie Sanders, *Adaptation & Appropriation* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 3.

## 2.2 "Penelope"

Although this poem is not titled 'Mrs ...', the premise of the poem cleverly exemplifies the title of the whole collection, as Penelope is one of the most notorious wife figures in the literary history, a figure that has been praised and admired for her fidelity and approach to her role as a wife. In the poem "Penelope", Carol Ann Duffy appropriates Homer's grand epic *Odyssey* from her feminist perspective, as she retrieves the character of Penelope from the passive position of a faithful wife patiently waiting for her husband. Instead, Penelope is given full agency, not only as a wife, but also as a creative woman; the core of the poem is based on Penelope's sewing and embroidery which she used as a tactic to drive away the unwanted suitors. Duffy plays with the dynamics of marriage, but she does so in a subversive way – Penelope as the speaker of the poem is not lamenting the absence of her husband, but rather, she is an independent woman who values her time alone.

Sadness and mourning that is expected from the speaker of the poem is expressed only in the first lines of the first stanza – absence of her husband suddenly feels too strange and unfamiliar. But the narrative aspect of the poem moves rapidly, in the same way that Penelope's attitude to her husband leaving changes as time goes on. The need for a man right by her side disappears quite quickly, as she gets used to her own company and starts actually enjoying it. The play on words that is so characteristic of Duffy's poetry is utilized here in variation of forms and different nuances of their semantic meanings: "and then I noticed that whole days had passed / without my noticing."<sup>13</sup> This use of wordplay might mirror the attitude of the speaker of the poem and how she is starting to understand that she does not need a husband by her side, as she is able to live freely and independently by herself.

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<sup>13</sup> Carol Ann Duffy, "Penelope," in *The World's Wife* (London: Picador, 2017), 70.

### 2.2.1 Embroidery as a symbol of feminine self-expression

The following stanzas depict Penelope as she is stitching together her life story in a piece of embroidery. Duffy based this frame on the Homeric epic in which Penelope stayed faithful to her husband for twenty years as she managed to fend off her suitors by inventing a clever trick with the shroud for Laertes.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, all the central motifs and metaphors are also circling around the theme of sewing and embroidery. Duffy intricately weaves a whole range of semantic relations, from synonymy to metonymy, as well as different connotations related to the craft of sewing into her poetic language – the language closely mimics the principal image of the poem. The poem subversively invites the possibility that Penelope’s trick was not so much an act of keeping her fidelity to Odysseus as it was an attempt to maintain her own freedom and independence outside of marriage. The embroidery that the speaker of the poem is creating serves as a means of her self-expression as a woman with a creative potential. Her work is autobiographical – she is embroidering her past life: “I sewed a girl / under a single star – cross-stitch, silver silk – / running after childhood’s bouncing ball.”<sup>15</sup> She is conceiving her life as a piece of embroidery, stitching all the joy and hope she felt as a little girl into it. Having depicted her early childhood, Penelope moves to the later stage of her life, the stage when she met with her husband – the language of the third stanza moves from a romanticized picture of their early relationship into a more sober look at the later progression of it: “I wrapped a maiden in a deep embrace / with heroism’s boy / and lost myself completely / in a wild embroidery of love, lust, loss, lessons learnt; / then watched him sail away / into the loose gold stitching of the sun.”<sup>16</sup> It is in the alliterative line that the attitudes of the speaker change from the romantic expectations of her marriage to the reality that awaited her.

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<sup>14</sup> Carolyn Higbie, “Hellenistic Mythographers,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Mythology*, ed. Roger D. Woodard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 238.

<sup>15</sup> Duffy, “Penelope,” 70.

<sup>16</sup> Duffy, “Penelope,” 70.

The poem then moves the embroidery from the sphere of artistic expression of the speaker's life to its function as a defence mechanism against the plethora of suitors who wanted to tie Penelope to their side. She willingly unpicks her creation in order to save her liberty. Paul Tolliver Brown comments on this side of Penelope's industry:

By day, she assumes a fake identity and threads a representation of a more 'authentic' self. By night, she no longer needs to pretend to be grieving, but she must unstitch her work. As she constructs and then deconstructs her art, she constructs and then deconstructs herself as a subject.<sup>17</sup>

The embroidery allows the speaker of the poem to fulfil herself as a woman and a person by her own right, not someone who would diminish herself in order to properly fit into the role of a wife – this metaphor of the creative potential expands the role of a wife who invents a method of deception only to stay faithful to her husband into a figure whose artistic endeavour sustains her individuality and autonomy over herself.

The image that Duffy develops in the last stanza, when Odysseus is returning to Penelope, is an image that implies the likely end of Penelope's liberty: "I was picking out / the smile of a woman at the centre / of this world, self-contained, absorbed, content, / most certainly not waiting."<sup>18</sup> Her embroidery suggests that she realizes that it will become almost impossible to be the woman "at the centre / of this world"<sup>19</sup> with her husband present – her husband will push her out of that position and her full freedom will become minimized. And yet, Duffy leaves the end of the poem quite open, as the speaker of the poem continues with her embroidery, a trick that helped her to resist the attempts of men to intrude into her peace before: "I licked my scarlet thread / and aimed it surely at the middle of the needle's eye / once more."<sup>20</sup> The certain nature

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<sup>17</sup> Paul Tolliver Brown, "The Artist and Her Work in Carol Ann Duffy's Poetry," *English: Journal of the English Association* 69, issue 266 (Autumn 2020): 291, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.is.cuni.cz/10.1093/english/efaa016>

<sup>18</sup> Duffy, "Penelope," 71.

<sup>19</sup> Duffy, "Penelope," 71.

<sup>20</sup> Duffy, "Penelope," 71.

of the words in the last three stanzas reveals that Penelope will maintain her efforts in hope that it might keep off another intruder, this time, her long-gone husband whom she long ceased to miss. In this manner, Carol Ann Duffy re-told the myth of Penelope, a woman whose whole story was defined by the absence of a man by her side – this poem grants Penelope the authorship over her own life, not defined by anyone other than herself.

### 2.3 "Eurydice"

The thematic motif of woman as an author and a creative persona is extended also to the poem "Eurydice", which reconstructs the original myth of the poet Orpheus – the poetic abilities are ascribed also to his wife, Eurydice. Avril Horner suggests that Duffy continues in the endeavours of writers, such as D.H. Lawrence or H.D., who used the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice as a means of exploring the dynamics of creativity and that she “does so with a candid irreverence for both the individual and tradition, with a special swipe (again) at the conceit of the male poet.”<sup>21</sup> Carol Ann Duffy does not only grant Eurydice the authorial space as the speaker of the dramatic monologue, she also retreats Eurydice from the position of a passive inspiration to Orpheus’ poetry that needs to be saved by his verses – she assigns her the role of an active woman with a sharp tongue who takes destiny into her own hands, refusing for her life to be dictated by the actions of a man.

As some of the other poems in *The World's Wife*, the poem "Eurydice" also has a direct addressee, in this case, the speaker, Eurydice, is speaking to ‘girls’, reinforcing the understanding of the individual poems as dramatic monologues. She is addressing them from the Underworld, occupying the space of no one, “a place where language stopped, / a black full stop, a black hole / where words had to come to an end.”<sup>22</sup> This death of language is mirrored

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<sup>21</sup> Avril Horner, “‘Small Female Skull’,” in *The Poetry of Carol Ann Duffy*, ed. Angelica Michelis and Antony Rowland (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 114.

<sup>22</sup> Carol Ann Duffy, “Eurydice,” in *The World's Wife* (London: Picador, 2017), 58.

by the limited vocabulary that Duffy employed in these lines, repeating the same words, as the creative feature of language has ceased to exist. The whole structure of the poem is quite unconventional, not applying any regularities in the metre or rhyming scheme – as Paul Tolliver Brown notes,

Duffy's Eurydice composes a type of anti-poem dramatizing the conflict at the levels of language and genre. Orpheus represents the poetic tradition replete with lyre and a series of restrictive forms, whereas Eurydice adopts an informal style and a more fluid structure.<sup>23</sup>

Therefore, the structure of the poem in itself is an act of subversion, as Eurydice, by being the speaker of the poem, frees herself from the literary tradition that is predominantly male-centred and not allowing any expression of the feminine unless it followed the man-made rules. Eurydice is enjoying her authorial freedom, not bound by the poetic rules or strict forms. Historical literary conventions being the domain of the male gaze are hinted at throughout the whole poem: "Things were different back then. / For the men, verse-wise, / Big O was the boy. Legendary."<sup>24</sup> Suggests that now comes the time for change, for women to usurp the attention that had been directed to men only. Recalling Cixous' words: "Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies."<sup>25</sup>

Readers are invited, throughout the whole poem, to explore the myth from the perspective of Eurydice, who is trying to break away from the manacles of a marriage, as well as, metaphorically, from the manacles of male-dominated world of literature. She no longer wants to be the object of male poetry, to be circumscribed by it. She is annoyed when he "calls her His Muse"<sup>26</sup>, as she is her own author, she does not need a man to write her life for her and

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<sup>23</sup> Brown, "The Artist and Her Work in Carol Ann Duffy's Poetry," 289.

<sup>24</sup> Duffy, "Eurydice," 59.

<sup>25</sup> Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 875.

<sup>26</sup> Duffy, "Eurydice," 58.

assign her roles that she does not wish to fulfil. When Orpheus appears on the scene with his lyre, the language of the poem becomes constricted as if his arrival knocked the wind out of Eurydice, managing to utter only short syllables: “Him. / Big O. / Larger than life.”<sup>27</sup> He came “With his lyre / and a poem to pitch, with me as the prize.”<sup>28</sup> She becomes the trophy of a hunted woman, a prize for the man and his ego.

While adhering to the original mythological narrative of the source in certain parts of the poem, other lines move completely away from it, inserting more contemporary knowledge and background into them. For example, in the fifth stanza: “Bollocks. (I’d done all the typing myself, / I should know.)”<sup>29</sup> Duffy is referring to the common practice of some well-known authors, to have their wives type their works for them – the women could be often considered co-authors of those works, but seldom acknowledged as such. This allusion was also analysed in detail by Avril Horner:

Placing herself in the long tradition of talented women who helped male partners or relatives in their work – from Milton’s daughters to Dorothy Wordsworth to Plath (who typed Hughes’s poems for him) – she signals disaffection from such exploitation.<sup>30</sup>

The dissatisfaction with the literary world being still the domain of men is explored throughout the poem, especially in the lines: “But Gods are like publishers, / usually male”<sup>31</sup> – by inserting the simile in the first line, she creates an anticipation of a major revelation, but then she reveals something so mundane and obvious, and yet still absolutely overlooked.

The stanza which depicts Orpheus’ victory and his prize of getting Eurydice back suggests the unwillingness of the speaker to return to their previous life. Even as she mentions

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<sup>27</sup> Duffy, “Eurydice,” 59.

<sup>28</sup> Duffy, “Eurydice,” 59.

<sup>29</sup> Duffy, “Eurydice,” 59.

<sup>30</sup> Horner, “‘Small Female Skull’,” 114.

<sup>31</sup> Duffy, “Eurydice,” 59.

her own name for the first time, it is immediately followed by “Orpheus’ wife –“<sup>32</sup>, referencing the title of the whole collection, as again, the woman is defined by the man by her side. The following enumeration of poetic forms and genres is a metaphor for their own relationship – being the wife of Orpheus is constricting Eurydice and this is exemplified by the choice of the poetic forms she listed, as they are known for their rigidity and complicated structures. He has his wish fulfilled, while she is only a passive onlooker in the original myth. But Duffy is openly subverting and confronting the original by putting the agency into the hands of the woman: “Girls, forget what you’ve read. / It happened like this – / I did everything in my power / to make him look back.”<sup>33</sup> Eurydice refuses to have her life course dictated by a man.

### 2.3.1 "Eurydice" and the notion of *écriture féminine*

When Duffy changes the source material, from Orpheus being too eager to look at Eurydice,<sup>34</sup> to Eurydice being active and making him look at her, she is also offering a commentary on self-expression of Eurydice: “I was thinking of filching the poem / out of his cloak, / when inspiration finally struck. / I stopped, thrilled. / He was yard in front. / My voice shook when I spoke –“<sup>35</sup> She does not trick him by relying on his own words and poetry, but she relies purely on his egotism, and her own ideas and voice. Paul Tolliver Brown emphasizes that

like the rest of Duffy’s poem, these lines are polysemous. Eurydice thinks of a way to trick her spouse and remain in Hade, but she also decides to compose her own poems rather than stealing them from the legendary bard.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Duffy, “Eurydice,” 60.

<sup>33</sup> Duffy, “Eurydice,” 61.

<sup>34</sup> Jennifer R. March, *Dictionary of Classical Mythology. Second edition* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2014), 360, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xww&AN=810079&lang=cs&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>35</sup> Duffy, “Eurydice,” 61.

<sup>36</sup> Brown, “The Artist and Her Work in Carol Ann Duffy’s Poetry,” 290.

The whole poem employs a tone that is bitingly satirical, characteristic of Duffy's poetry, as she is mocking the male ego and the clichéd tradition of writing poetry as a declaration of love. But her Eurydice is a woman who refuses to comply with the male-centred world, and she uses her voice to find her own feminine authorial freedom, not circumscribed by the poetry of men. By letting Eurydice free herself from these assigned spaces, Duffy echoes Cixous and her encouragement of feminine self-expression, of *écriture féminine*:

Write, let no one hold you back, let nothing stop you: not man; not the imbecilic capitalist machinery, in which publishing houses are the crafty, obsequious relayers of imperatives handed down by an economy that works against us and off our backs; and not yourself.<sup>37</sup>

#### 2.4 "Demeter"; "Thetis"

This subchapter will be focused on the analysis of two poems from the collection: "Demeter" and "Thetis". They will be discussed in the same subchapter, as they are poems in which Duffy explores the theme of motherhood as a specific experience of the feminine. Although united by mother characters as the speakers of the poem, they employ various techniques and tones to refer to the role of mother figures. Jeffrey Wainwright argues that

the strut of masculinity is mocked throughout *The World's Wife*, but the mother and child – seen here as the life force – are poised to withstand its more formidable face, war and death. To do so will require a further metamorphosis: changing the future.<sup>38</sup>

Their motherhood opens up a new dimension of the feminine that is then utilized by Duffy to portray womanhood in all its complexity.

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<sup>37</sup> Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 877.

<sup>38</sup> Jeffrey Wainwright, "Female Metamorphoses," in *The Poetry of Carol Ann Duffy*, ed. Angelica Michelis and Antony Rowland (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 55.

### 2.4.1 "Demeter"

"Demeter" is the last poem in *The World's Wife* and in many aspects, it is a poem that does not completely fit into the humorous and often male-mocking tone of the whole collection. Rather than that, it is the only poem that does not have any direct reference to a male figure. Jeanette Winterson noted that "it is about nobody's wife. That choice is an audacious signal. A message that something else is happening now. We are leaving for elsewhere. A new beginning."<sup>39</sup> Its focus is completely on the feminine and the experience of motherhood. Moreover, the poem is the closest to ancient myths in its temporal location as being ahistorical, as it does not include any references to the world of 20<sup>th</sup> century, or any other period in history which is the case of other poems in this collection. Demeter, the Olympian goddess of harvest and agriculture, is the speaker of the poem, employing the perspective of a mother who is grieving over her lost daughter Persephone. Carol Ann Duffy utilizes the myth of Persephone and her being married to Hades to write a lyrical poem on the relationship of mother and daughter. In the whole poem, Duffy relies on the audience's familiarity with the source material as she does not directly mention Hades, nor the existence of the Underworld. Jeffrey Wainwright in the chapter "Female Metamorphoses" in *The Poetry of Carol Ann Duffy* suggests that

Duffy succeeds here in melting together story and recognizable occurrence in a way that humanizes the myth. [...] Indeed Demeter's emotion is the warmest, most positive feeling to be seen among any of Duffy's Ovidian heroines,<sup>40</sup>

as the lyric offers an emotional contemplation of Demeter who is awaiting the return of her beloved child.

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<sup>39</sup> Winterson, "Jeanette Winterson on the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy."

<sup>40</sup> Wainwright, "Female Metamorphoses," 54.

### 2.4.2 "Demeter" as a sonnet of motherly love

The structure of the poem is not totally dissimilar to the structure of a sonnet – "Demeter" is also composed of fourteen lines with a final couplet, which is a feature that resonates with the form of a sonnet the most. The first two stanzas open the poem with an exploration of the grief that Demeter feels when she is thinking about her daughter. This is done mostly through metaphors of ice and winter, utilizing the common connotation of coldness with negative emotions. The absence of her daughter creates an environment characterized by hopelessness exemplified by the image of barren lands in the winter: "Where I lived – winter and hard earth."<sup>41</sup> Carol Ann Duffy wittily employed the image of non-fertile fields, earth and stones rather than snow to depict the emotions of Demeter, as she is the goddess of harvest and agriculture who is denied joy, and the environment around her reflects her state of mind, as the grief and coldness seep through the page. The whole poem changes in the third stanza which serves as a turning point when Persephone appears in the distance. Also, the imagery changes: coldness becomes warmth as Demeter sees her daughter. Therefore, Persephone, as in Ovid's version of this myth, becomes an embodiment of light and spring. Yet, it is the mother-daughter relationship full of love for each other that creates and brings the hope. Duffy equates the power of mother's love for her daughter to the power of nature that affects everyone by granting or not granting them favourable conditions for agriculture and harvesting.

But Carol Ann Duffy, even in this lyrical composition, does not abandon the play with language and poetic devices she delivers in other poems of the collection. Although not employing end-rhymes heavily, there are few instances of internal rhymes along with consonance and assonance. By the ever-present allusions to the cycle of nature, she constantly reminds the readers of the role that Demeter plays in the Greco-Roman mythology, and that is

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<sup>41</sup> Carol Ann Duffy, "Demeter," in *The World's Wife* (London: Picador, 2017), 76.

being the goddess of harvest. The words of the speaker, alternation of their forms or synonyms and their repetition enhance the meaning of heartbrokenness: “I sat in my cold stone room / choosing tough words, granite, flint, / to break the ice. My broken heart – “<sup>42</sup>

The last couplet of the poem is an exception in the aural structure, as the lines are formed on the basis of an end-rhyme – this sudden change to a regular rhyme mirrors the balance that is established when Demeter is reunited with her daughter, as well as the harmony that is magically brought to the world with the return of Persephone from the Underworld: “the blue sky smiling, none too soon, / with the small shy mouth of a new moon.”<sup>43</sup> The subtle nod to the future indicates that it is precisely the love of a woman in its motherly potential that creates the possibilities to create a new future, one that would be feminine. This is a notion that was already explored by Cixous in her essay *The Laugh of the Medusa*:

In women there is always more or less of the mother who makes everything all right, who nourishes, and who stands up against separation; a force that will not be cut off but will knock the wind out of the codes. We will rethink womankind beginning with every form and every period of her body. <sup>44</sup>

## 2.5 "Thetis"

"Demeter" is not the only poem in *The World's Wife* that explores the topic of motherhood – the poem based on the figure of Thetis touches on the same subject but from a totally different perspective and in a completely different tone. The source material for this poem is the myth of Thetis, a Nereid whose myth was also narrated in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Thetis is remembered in popular culture mostly as the mother of Achilles, but what often escapes attention is the fact that she was forced into the marriage by Peleus who trapped her. Carol Ann Duffy chose to reinterpret Thetis' attempts to escape the rape and marriage by transforming into different

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<sup>42</sup> Duffy, "Demeter," 76.

<sup>43</sup> Duffy, "Demeter," 76.

<sup>44</sup> Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 882.

creatures and forms of life <sup>45</sup> – attempts that were futile in the end, as Peleus subdued her and eventually, she bore his son, Achilles.

### 2.5.1 Structure as a mirror to the narrative

The poem accounts for all the transformations that Thetis went through, and Duffy narrates them in regular stanzas. Each stanza has the same structure – first two lines of each stanza show the transformation into a specific creature or natural element and point to the reasoning behind the shift. The animals are portrayed with their natural strengths suggesting their ability to fight and be free. All of them should be the most powerful and fearful creatures in their own space, reflecting their freedom. But then, the stanzas change in the middle when a man with his man-made weapons comes to the scene, evoking the human disruption of the natural order by the use of technology. The men are portrayed as hunters which ties in with the image of Thetis being hunted, not as a trophy, but for her body and her ability to bear a child. When Thetis is met with the aggression and confinement from Peleus, she becomes as powerless as the animals standing at the gunpoint of the hunter: “But my gold eye saw / the guy in the grass with the gun. Twelve bore.”<sup>46</sup> The repetition of the structure seven times always with the same result mirrors the futility of her attempts at saving herself. The form creates a suffocating feeling as the animals into which Thetis transforms cannot escape and they are defeated in their own natural habitat.

A closer analysis of the third stanza exemplifies how the structure of the whole poem works: Thetis has shape-shifted into a snake, a creature that is commonly feared. But her freedom was cut short as a man appeared, strangling her. The use of short lines and non-verbal clauses effectively mimics the fact of Thetis being crushed and strangled, not being able to

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<sup>45</sup> Elaine Fantham. “Transforming Bodies, Transforming epic” in *Ovid’s Metamorphoses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 13.  
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xww&AN=264856&lang=cs&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>46</sup> Carol Ann Duffy, “Thetis,” in *The World’s Wife* (London: Picador, 2017), 5.

voice herself: “So I shopped for a suitable shape. / Size 8. Snake. / Big Mistake.”<sup>47</sup> She is not strangled only literally by Peleus binding her, but also metaphorically by not being able to breathe and be free under the constraints of a forced marriage that began with a rape. The continuous appearance of enumerations demonstrates the sense of panic setting in as Thetis is trying to transform into all the different forms to avoid Peleus, but she is always caught and denied her freedom. The language itself is echoing the desperate situation in which the speaker of the poem appears: “But I felt my wings / clipped by the squint of a crossbow’s eye.”<sup>48</sup> No matter how hard the speaker tries or how many different forms she inhabits, the man always render the position of the speaker inescapable.

However, the last two stanzas of the poem do not completely comply with the transformations offered in the preceding stanzas, as the metamorphosis in them is one to a natural element rather than an animal. And yet, even this element of nature, air specifically, is disrupted by a “fighter plane”<sup>49</sup>. Similar description is given in the last stanzas, but in this case, with fire: “Then my tongue was flame / and my kisses burned, / but the groom wore asbestos.”<sup>50</sup> Here, the man does not completely overpower the woman, but rather is only resistant to her newly acquired power.

### **2.5.2 Transformation into a mother**

Only the last lines of the poem point to Thetis’ final transformation – transformation into motherhood. Duffy does not offer us any clues how this change might play out, as even the structure of the last stanza is distinct from the rest of the poem. There is no man with a weapon pointing it at Thetis, rather it is her son who occupies the final space in the dramatic monologue, but is he the same disruption as the constricting male presence of the previous stanzas? Jeffrey

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<sup>47</sup> Duffy, “Thetis,” 5.

<sup>48</sup> Duffy, “Thetis,” 5.

<sup>49</sup> Duffy, “Thetis,” 6.

<sup>50</sup> Duffy, “Thetis,” 6.

Wainwright notes that “the physical image is clear enough, and the implication must be that this turning ‘inside out’ is the one successful, truly transformative change of shape that Thetis makes,”<sup>51</sup> while Avril Horner suggests that “‘the child’ here is perhaps also the inner expressive self of Thetis with which she has had to struggle through so many transformations, to set free.”<sup>52</sup> Echoing her stance towards motherhood in the poem "Demeter", as well as the notions of Cixous, these two interpretations of the final lines of the poem "Thetis" might coexist, as Thetis unlocks the creative potential of a woman who is “is never far from ‘mother’ (I mean outside her role functions: the ‘mother’ as nonname and as source of goods)”<sup>53</sup> because “there is always within her at least a little of that good mother’s milk. She writes in white ink.”<sup>54</sup>

## 2.6 "Circe"; "Medusa"

Two poems of *The World's Wife* that are based on the myths of transformation will be the central focus of this subchapter. "Circe" and "Medusa" will be discussed together not only on the basis of the original source containing a significant metamorphosis, but also due to the fact that these two female characters of Greco-Roman myths have been considered a threatening force to men. Their magical abilities along with their sexuality established them among the most formidable female characters of the Classical mythology. In her poetry, Duffy does not hesitate to portray them in their full complexity— she does not purify these female characters in order to render them agreeable, rather she leans into their possible evil nature. Although these poems share the basic premise of re-telling a myth of a fearful woman, be it a sorceress or a declared monster, the two poems are dissimilar in the tone and approach that Duffy employed in them.

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<sup>51</sup> Wainwright, “Female Metamorphoses,” 55.

<sup>52</sup> Horner, “‘Small Female Skull’,” 111.

<sup>53</sup> Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 881.

<sup>54</sup> Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 881.

### 2.6.1 “Circe”

A witch, a sorceress, an enchantress – all terms by which the figure of Circe is remembered in literary history. In the *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*, Circe is among “figures symbolizing a formidable type of femininity associated with darkness and the night [...] who, as the embodiment of a disturbing inevitability, exercise an evil power over men.”<sup>55</sup> Her character is intrinsically linked to the Homeric epic and connected to Odysseus and his crew on their way back to Ithaca. When they stumbled across her island, she offered them food and wine mixed with a magical potion that turned the crew into pigs, but only physically as they kept their intelligence.<sup>56</sup> This metamorphosis enacted by Circe and her magical powers forms the basis for Duffy’s appropriation in the form of poetry. As the original myth already entails an element of grotesque when Circe closes the newly transformed pigs into a sty, Duffy embraces the absurd and reimagines the myth in a humorous tone, creating a poem that is bitingly satirical in its essence. “Circe” heavily relies on the audience’s familiarity with the original myth, as the witty nature of the language that Duffy produces stems from the possibility of equating the pigs she presents with the transformed men of Odysseus’ crew.

Carol Ann Duffy structured the poem as a recipe, evoking popular cooking shows with Circe, speaker of the poem, addressing nymphs and nereids, giving them instructions on proper methods of preparation. The first lines of the poem serve as Circe’s presentation of the power she wields over the transformed men: “One way or another, all pigs have been mine – / under my thumb, the bristling, salty skin of their backs”<sup>57</sup>. The description then moves to the specific characteristics of pigs, such as the sounds they make or how they smell. But the language that

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<sup>55</sup> Peter Brunel, *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 184, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>56</sup> March, *Dictionary of Classical Mythology. Second edition*, 128, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xww&AN=810079&lang=cs&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>57</sup> Carol Ann Duffy, “Circe,” in *The World’s Wife* (London: Picador, 2017), 47.

Duffy utilizes switches between words and phrases typically associated with pigs, such as “their percussions of oinks / and grunts, their squeals”<sup>58</sup> and those that have conventionally human connotations as in “their yobby, porky colognes”<sup>59</sup>, creating a humorous image in which swine and men are almost impossible to discern. Moreover, the language of description is highly sensory, inviting mostly the sense of touch, smell, and hearing, building up to the following stanzas that are mimicking the structure of a popular recipe, fully capitalizing on the sense of taste.

### 2.6.2 “Circe” as a satire

The two subsequent stanzas are in their form completely committed to the style of a culinary programme host giving instructions for cooking, with the underlying tone of a male-mocking satire. The speaker dissects the pig, making the body parts indistinguishable from those of a man as she wittily adds human functions to them. She draws attention to all the negative characteristics of men and her experience with them, addressing it to nymphs and nereids, her younger female listeners as a form of advice, even warning perhaps from the perspective of a more experienced woman: “Look at that simmering lug, at that ear, / did it listen, ever, to you, to your prayers and rhymes, / to the chimes of your voice, singing and clear?”<sup>60</sup> The poem is filled with enumerations and lists including not only a variety of synonyms but also a high frequency of internal rhymes, rendering the poetry dynamic. Another of the most distinctive features of Duffy’s poetic language is her use of wordplay and puns. This can be seen in the passages full of sexual innuendo: “Remember the skills of the tongue – / to lick, to lap, to loosen, lubricate, to lie / in the soft pouch of the face”.<sup>61</sup> In these lines Duffy not only shows her ability to play with both the conventional and more unseemly connotations of

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<sup>58</sup> Duffy, “Circe,” 47.

<sup>59</sup> Duffy, “Circe,” 47.

<sup>60</sup> Duffy, “Circe,” 47

<sup>61</sup> Duffy, “Circe,” 47

the words, but also demonstrates her witty manoeuvring of the poetic form – by leaving the verb ‘to lie’ at the end of the line, she exploits its homonymic nature, as it first invites the understanding of it as the act of deceit (especially when in uttered in connection to the previous lines depicting tongue) rather than a thing being placed or set horizontally.<sup>62</sup> Jane Dowson wrote on the language of this poem

In Duffy’s monologue, the enchantress devours the bodies of the pigs with a mix of revenge and sexual enjoyment [...] The constant rhyming mimics Circe’s magic spells and, like a radical feminist, she speaks of men as pigs. However, she also challenges such generalized aversion by establishing their individuality: ‘each pig’s face / was uniquely itself, as many handsome as plain, / the cowardly face, the brave, the comical, noble, / sly or wise, the cruel, the kind’.<sup>63</sup>

And yet, her acknowledgment of male’s individuality and their virtues is halted almost immediately by the following: “but all of them, / nymphs, with those piggy eyes.”<sup>64</sup> The male-mocking tone is restored as she returns to their animalistic qualities. The last line of the third stanza extends the notion of Circe preparing the pigs with revenge in mind: “When the heart of a pig has hardened, dice it small.”<sup>65</sup> Duffy employs ‘heart’ not only as the physical organ, but also in its traditional literary use as a symbol of love and kindness, both of which are lacking when it hardens. Therefore, Circe is encouraging her fellow women to strike back and enact revenge.

While the first three stanzas develop the male-mocking satire in a humorous tone, the last stanza departs from them both in style and tone. The poem turns almost into a lyric of melancholy, Circe reminiscing about her youth and romanticized visions of men. The stanza

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<sup>62</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “lie (v.1),” March 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7314827967>.

<sup>63</sup> Jane Dowson, “Words between Women,” in *Carol Ann Duffy: Poet for Our Times* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 140.

<sup>64</sup> Duffy, “Circe,” 47.

<sup>65</sup> Duffy, “Circe,” 47.

opens with the repetition of “Dice it small”<sup>66</sup> – here, not a triumphant call for revenge, but almost as if in regret that her younger self had not known this attitude before. As the tone of the poem changes, the sounds of the poem change as well – Duffy employs long sweeping sentences with longer, more open vowels and diphthongs, as well as consonance of sibilants, making the language slow down as the speaker is absorbed in her memories. Carol Ann Duffy cleverly utilizes the contrast between the previous stanzas of a pounding rhythm and the calmer, flowing last stanza to echo the differing attitude of the speaker.

The whole poem depends on a physical imagery, and it is no different in the last stanza – this is a uniting element in the poetic language of the poem. As well as in the previous stanzas, the body, here of Circe herself, is not portrayed fully, but rather only its certain parts are highlighted. By the depiction of the typically sexualized parts of a female body, the speaker of the poem asserts her sexuality which she applies to create a desire and longing in the men that approach her. She is recalling the times in which she still believed in love, and she used her appearance to lure them in: “Of course, I was younger then. And hoping for men.”<sup>67</sup> But this melancholic reminiscing about her own past is in the final lines of the poem diverted back by the more sober perspective of the adult version of the speaker of them poem, returning to the humorous tone that was established in the beginning. Wainwright comments on the possible interpretation of the last lines:

Either they are a parody of girlish romanticism which is promptly skewered by the wisened-up voice of the man-eating cook, or they evoke a lost and lamented eroticism. Either way the two modes of sensuality in the poem lie against each other in an intriguing way.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Duffy, “Circe,” 48.

<sup>67</sup> Duffy, “Circe,” 47.

<sup>68</sup> Wainwright, “Female Metamorphoses,” 52.

### 2.6.3 "Medusa"

Her petrifying gaze has served as an inspiration to artists and philosophers since the ages of Antiquity. Her nature has been understood as full of ambiguities and contradictions:

Indeed, the figure of Medusa is characterized by paradox, both in terms of the actual mythical stare, which turned men to stone, and in the interpretations that have been given to it. The fascination she exerts arises from a combination of beauty and horror.<sup>69</sup>

It is precisely this combination of the beautiful and the monstrous of Medusa's figure that Carol Ann Duffy utilizes as the basis for her poetic appropriation of this Greco-Roman myth. Expanding her poetic endeavour of writing poetry that would focus on the margins, also Duffy's retelling of the myth of Medusa is a continuation of this process. Notably, in *The Laugh of the Medusa*, the leading essay of the French feminist literary theory, the figure of Medusa became an emblem for the feminist empowerment in writing, relocating the focal point to the margins inhabited by women. Gregory Staley notes that "Cixous' Medusa is in this ancient tradition, laughing from the margins at the perspective of men who have placed themselves in the 'privileged centre'."<sup>70</sup> Also Duffy's "Medusa" is a poem that invites one to look at the margins, to look at the spaces occupied by women that evoke fear and respect by the confidence they have in their femininity and sexuality.

### 2.6.4 Transforming the original narrative

In her dramatic monologue, Duffy changes the original narrative – the speaker of the poem, Medusa, is not a victim of Athena's jealousy and the subsequent curse inflicted on her, as is the case in some versions of the myth. Rather, Medusa's own jealousy is the cause of the mythical metamorphosis of growing snakes on her head instead of hair: "A suspicion, a doubt,

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<sup>69</sup> Brunel, *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*, 779.

<sup>70</sup> Gregory Staley, "'Beyond glorious Ocean': Feminism, Myth, and America," in *Laughing with Medusa: Classical Myth and Feminist Thought*, ed. Vanda Zajko and Miriam Leonard (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2006), 215.

a jealousy / grew in my mind, / which turned the hairs on my head to filthy snakes, / as though my thoughts / hissed and spat on my scalp.”<sup>71</sup> The toxic thoughts and emotions are physically manifested in the change of Medusa’s appearance. The snakes that have formed on her head are considered to be animals frequently used in symbolism, alluding to the biblical temptation that has feminine connotations, to the land of the dead or even used in psychoanalysis as phallic symbols<sup>72</sup> – the negative meaning of this symbol is strengthened by the attribute ‘filthy’, proving that “traditionally, [...] snakes are thought of as fear inducing.”<sup>73</sup> The visual image that is created in the first stanza is reinforced by the poet’s characteristic play with sounds, specifically sibilants.

The second stanza develops the gruesome visual when the internal corruption of the speaker is mirrored by her outward demeanour – Medusa details her physical attributes in a gruesome and repulsive way, leaning into the monstrous part of herself. Carol Ann Duffy is not hesitant to portray women negatively, acknowledging their own anguish and vice. The emotions of Medusa, typically understood as negative, turned into weapons for her, making the men terrified: “I’m foul mouthed, foul tongued, / yellow fanged. / There are bullet tears in my eyes. / Are you terrified?”<sup>74</sup> Medusa is embracing her newly acquainted repulsive and horrifying image, understanding that it will become her power. Garber and Vickers note that “the tension between the beautiful Medusa and the monstrous one is intrinsic to the story, to the figure of Medusa herself.”<sup>75</sup> The opening line of the third stanza portrays her already revelling in her frightening potential, realizing that her monstrosity is her defence mechanism now and that her beauty will no longer put her into the position of a victim.

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<sup>71</sup> Carol Ann Duffy, “Medusa,” in *The World’s Wife* (London: Picador, 2017), 40.

<sup>72</sup> Hans Biedermann, *Dictionary of Symbolism. Cultural Icons and the Meanings Behind Them*. (New York: Meridian, 1994), 312.

<sup>73</sup> Biedermann, *Dictionary of Symbolism*, 311.

<sup>74</sup> Duffy, “Medusa,” 40.

<sup>75</sup> Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers, *The Medusa Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 1.

### 2.6.5 Appearance as a weapon

But the rest of the third stanza fully reveals the underlying tragic tone, stemming from her sorrow over being betrayed in love: “It’s you I love, / perfect man, Greek God, my own; / but I know you’ll go, betray me, stray / from home.”<sup>76</sup> Therefore her transformation and her new abilities will be used to prevent similar heartbreak from occurring – she will become the one in power now, dominating over her own fate, as well as have the ability to exercise it over others. Her deadly gaze is at the core of the next three stanzas in which Duffy presents her mastery of language, capturing the different metamorphoses by flexibility of her vocabulary: the scale of transformations and of Medusa’s influence is portrayed through gradation, both of the verbs used, as well as the size of the animals transformed. The first stanza in this sequence employs the phrases “I glanced at a buzzing bee,”<sup>77</sup> and “I glanced at a singing bird,”<sup>78</sup> reflecting a cautious manner of just a quick look. The second stanza builds on this by the use of “I looked at a ginger cat,”<sup>79</sup> and “I looked at a snuffling pig,”<sup>80</sup> increasing both the agency in the verb, as well as the size of the animal transformed. Finally, the phrase “I stared”<sup>81</sup> implies full intent behind her action, being absolutely aware of the consequences. Before she mentions her final majestic accomplishment of changing a dragon into a mountain, implying that there are seemingly no limits to her power, the speaker offers three lines about herself: “I stared in the mirror. / Love gone bad / showed me a Gorgon.”<sup>82</sup> – she turns back to the causes of her own metamorphosis. But when paired with demonstration of the extent of her powers, it invites the

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<sup>76</sup> Duffy, “Medusa,” 40.

<sup>77</sup> Duffy, “Medusa,” 40.

<sup>78</sup> Duffy, “Medusa,” 40.

<sup>79</sup> Duffy, “Medusa,” 41.

<sup>80</sup> Duffy, “Medusa,” 41.

<sup>81</sup> Duffy, “Medusa,” 41.

<sup>82</sup> Duffy, “Medusa,” 41.

interpretation that the growth in her powers was associated with her physical and possibly also psychological corruption.

The last full stanza of "Medusa" moves away from the presentation of her magical, petrifying gaze. Duffy returns to the narrative of the source myth, as the employed metaphors point specifically to the moment when Medusa is overpowered by Perseus, who used a mirrored shield to avoid her deadly gaze: "And here you come / with a shield for a heart / and a sword for a tongue"<sup>83</sup> – applying objects of battle to describe the man, suggesting the depth of the emotional suffering he had caused her. The last line of the poem invites both the man and the reader to face the power that women can wield, even when they are hurt or tried to be stopped, echoing Cixous' famous words: "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing."<sup>84</sup> But Duffy's Medusa challenges the man to look at her even in her crushed state in order to see and understand the devastation he has brought onto her – to stop avoiding her female gaze that hides a broken heart.

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<sup>83</sup> Duffy, "Medusa," 41.

<sup>84</sup> Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 885.

## **Chapter 3 - No longer absent**

### **3.1 Introducing a woman into the perspective**

Addressing the silences of women in the majority of Western literary history, Carol Ann Duffy retells ancient myths and early modern legends from a novel point of view. In the three poems that will be analysed in this section, she invents a new female character, one whose voice was completely obliterated from the previous editions of the tales, and by that introduces a feminine perspective into the narrative and into the history. The new feminine voice claims the power that it was previously denied by being the speaker of the poem, ensuring that the world will hear her voice and that the women characters will be no longer pushed outside the stories. The new characters she introduces are not afraid to ridicule the men they are connected to, subverting the traditional interpretation of these mythical or legendary figures. With some of the poems, the wife characters she introduces are based on another female figure from the myth, therefore she plays with the existing, but diminished, feminine experience of it, while with others, Duffy invents a completely new character that would offer an alternative perspective on the tale, and especially on the behaviour of men. Positioning the new female voices into the role of a wife allows Duffy to concentrate on the wife-husband dynamic and exploit all the stereotypes that are typically associated with it.

### **3.2 "Mrs Midas"**

Carol Ann Duffy choosing to tell the story of Mrs Midas – a character that does not actually appear in Ovid's Midas – is a way of giving women their voices back, the voices which have been silenced for centuries in order to reinvent the social and power-holding structures we know today. Ovid's version of King Midas is in the heart of this poem. It is examined, disassembled, and then arranged in a new way – in a way that offers a new perception on this

narrative and its effects. The pieces of the original myth are still there but a new light is shed on them. The poem illuminates the parts of the story which were left in the dark for centuries, therefore this feminist rewriting gives them a new life. In a lecture, Duffy mentioned her changing stance towards the myth, especially how she perceived the consequences of Midas' wish:

As a child I was enthralled, enchanted by that moment when he is given a wish by the gods and asks that everything he touches will be turned to gold. But as an adult writer, I felt very queasy imagining being his lover shortly after that wish was granted.<sup>85</sup>

Classical myths offer an opportunity to put women in the perspective, because many readers will be already well-acquainted with them, and this creates grounds for turning and twisting them in order to illuminate the forgotten characters. This idea of reinventing the myths was noted by Susana Braund in her study of modern female-centred retellings: “[...] myth permits endless reinvention, revisioning, refocalization, renewal. It is always available to articulate both the certainties of the dominant culture and the challenges to those certainties.”<sup>86</sup> The roles to which women are bound are still created by patriarchal conventions, therefore re-tellings of these stories with a woman in its centre serves as a tool of subversion. There can never be a true blank instead of a woman figure in these stories, the absences have been created by the perpetuated ignorance towards the feminine and their experience. “Mrs Midas” and the whole collection *The World's Wife* proves this idea. That women figures are overlooked and forgotten during the course of history. Carol Ann Duffy reacts to this absence of a vocal feminine figure in the original myth by inventing a new voice of Mrs Midas. In that she plays with the female

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<sup>85</sup> Carol Ann Duffy, “Lost Lectures: Carol Ann Duffy,” *Lost Lectures*, (reading lecture at The Festival of Imagination, Selfridges & Co., London, 2014), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSyii8Sp-pk&t=105s>

<sup>86</sup> Susana Braund, “‘We’re here too, the ones without names.’ A study of female voices as imagined by Margaret Atwood, Carol Ann Duffy, and Marguerite Yourcenar,” *Classical receptions journal* 4, no.2 (November 2012): 206.

character of King Midas' daughter, who was turned into a golden sculpture according to some interpretations.

### 3.2.1 Relocation of the myth

Carol Ann Duffy subjects Ovid's myth to relocation, in terms of genre, speaker and the temporal setting. She transforms the myth into a poem, but at the same time, she maintains the narrative qualities in her poetic diction, making the poem flow as if told by a storyteller. It is Mrs Midas who assumes the role of the speaker of the poem, adding to the feminist agency behind the reworking of the myth. Even though the poem is divided into conventional stanzas, there is almost no use of end rhymes, neither an abundance of poetic devices. Her use of rhythm and internal rhymes seems almost accidental, as if the words just happen to rhyme while telling her story, which fuels this impression of reading a tale rather than a piece of poetry. Instead, Duffy plays with the length of sentences – at the beginning of the poem, when describing the calm scenery, her long flowing sentences reflect the peaceful atmosphere of the speaker's kitchen. But this is disrupted when the husband of Mrs Midas, referred to only by the pronoun 'he', appears on the scene. The utilized sentences then become varied in their length, with many short clauses appearing – adding to the tense atmosphere that is created by the wish of the husband and the complications it brings to their relationship. The heavy use of punctuation and employment of interrogative sentences augment the confusion and fear that is felt by Mrs Midas when she tries to comprehend the actions of her husband: "I said, / What in the name of God is going on? He started to laugh."<sup>87</sup>

But language in itself has proven to be patriarchal as it develops as a mirror of a societal and cultural structures – Libby Hudson suggests that the cultural ideas confine the language. It can be observed especially in the vocabulary as it reflects the notions of imperialism, militarism,

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<sup>87</sup> Carol Ann Duffy, "Mrs Midas," in *The World's Wife* (London: Picador, 2017), 11.

or sexism.<sup>88</sup> Carol Ann Duffy confronts this idea and disputes the language. Still, she keeps the title as Mrs Midas, referring to a woman only by her name acquired after marriage. She is not given any name or a nickname that would be hers and hers only. By this she challenges the readers to think about the language and how it reflects the societal stance towards women. How women's perspectives are acknowledged only when there is a visible connection to some man. But in the poem itself, she undermines this expectation created by linguistic choices and focuses on her – Mrs Midas claims this narrative as her own, not allowing her husband to take the attention away from her own experience and from her side of the story. By using a contemporary language, filled with modern expressions, Duffy moves Ovid's myth that is an ahistorical parable on vanity and greed into a scenery of the 1990s. She does so in a way that is playful and witty – she explores humour that stems from the language itself, expanding the message by puns and wordplays. The choice of words, be that nouns or adjectives, rotates around the image of gold which is in the heart of the original Ovid's version of Midas. Another play with language was noted by Braund: “when he asks for a glass of wine, Duffy captures the process of transformation brilliantly with the words ‘glass, goblet, golden chalice’”<sup>89</sup>. Her choice of words often attacks certain clichés, as they become quite paradoxical when used by Duffy in the context of this poem. One such example can be found in the lines of the eighth stanza: “And who, when it comes to the crunch, can live / with a heart of gold?”<sup>90</sup> Her use of this phrase is contradictory to how it has been used for centuries – as a denotation of a noble and brave character. This appropriation of phrases and clichés forces the readers to rethink not only the language itself, but also the connotations that are typically associated with the concepts of wealth and gold.

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<sup>88</sup> Libby Hudson, ““An axe to a willow to see how it wept’: the creative use of cliché and the commonplace in Carol Ann Duffy’s *The World’s Wife* is analysed by Libby Hudson,” *The English Review* 18, no. 2 (November 2007).

<sup>89</sup> Braund, ““We’re here too, the ones without names,”” 200.

<sup>90</sup> Duffy, “Mrs Midas,” 12.

### 3.2.2 Dismantling stereotypes by re-focalization

Carol Ann Duffy also looks at the stereotype of women being obsessed with money and gaining it by being gold-diggers. She turns this idea and examines the other side of it. “This thoughtful, funny poem questions the masculine obsession with money – far from the stereotype of woman as a gold digger.”<sup>91</sup> It is common that for a woman to be called a gold-digger when she strives to be wealthy, but when a man strives for money, he is called ambitious – Carol Ann Duffy successfully plays with these double standards in the approach towards men and women. Gold is typically associated with positive feelings, and it is often used to describe a period of great success and prosperity. But it also has a darker side to it, a side that can be tremendously detrimental. She examines this fascination with wealth and money that many men possess and highlights the negative aspects of it, how it affects not only the man but also his relationships and people around without them even noticing.

This male fixation with money is further hinted in: “[...] I thought of/the Field of the Cloth of Gold and of Miss Macready.”<sup>92</sup> The Field of the Cloth of Gold is a reference to Henry VIII and his obscene display of wealth and gold in order to assert his dominant position. Money has been used throughout the course of history as a tool of asserting one’s dominance and superiority over others. Those who were wealthy had been always highly regarded just on the basis of them having significant possessions while the poor were marginalized. This is still a practice that is experienced nowadays and was also experienced in the late 1990s when the poetry collection *The World’s Wife* was published. Carol Ann Duffy explores therefore not only the gender inequality, but also inequality in terms of wealth and property and how deeply it is

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<sup>91</sup> Jeanette Winterson, “Jeanette Winterson on the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy – of course it’s political,” *The Guardian*, January 17, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/17/jeanette-winterson-on-carol-ann-duffys-the-worlds-wife>

<sup>92</sup> Duffy, “Mrs Midas,” 11.

rooted in history. By this reference to Henry VIII and the Renaissance period she also creates a full circle as the period of Renaissance gathered inspiration from the classical Antiquity – the period in which the myth of Midas originated. The allusions that Duffy utilizes are quite varied in their nature, not evoking only historical figures such as kings or pharaohs, but also characters from literary works as can be seen in the second reference in the same line, Miss Macready. Miss Macready is a character known from the popular series *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis – this character appears in the first novel as the housekeeper of Professor Kirke. This allusion adds to the notion of materialism and obsession with one’s belongings.

The last stanzas of the poem push the narrative beyond the scope of the original myth that Duffy utilizes as her source. They show us Mrs Midas taking agency completely in her hands and she forces her husband to move out of the house. The poet strips away the lyrical metaphors and allusions and leaves the readers with a tone that is much simpler, employing only the necessary sentence elements. This enhances the completely pragmatic nature of the decision that the speaker of the poem makes. The final stanza of the poem then develops the tone even more, using language that mirrors frustration of Mrs Midas: “What gets me know is not the idiocy or greed / but lack of thought for me. Pure selfishness.”<sup>93</sup> But by the use of these words, Carol Ann Duffy complicates the image of Mrs Midas slightly, as they point to the possible selfishness of her also, as it is her being affected by the actions of her husband, not the actions themselves. Seemingly she does truly care about his greed or materialism, but rather the fact that he has robbed her of her happiness. The last line adds an emotional punchline – its strength is in the contrast that Duffy creates here, utilizing language that reflects sadness and grief over a lost relationship, emotions that were not expressed overtly in the preceding stanzas, therefore amplifying the complexity of the speaker of the poem. At the same time, the actions that the poem narrates does not portray a woman that would be a victim or a complacent wife,

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<sup>93</sup> Duffy, “Mrs Midas,” 13.

rather a survivor that does not hesitate to be active even though she understands the unpleasant consequences that may follow.

By placing a woman in the centre of her poem, a woman whose story was never shared before, Carol Ann Duffy undermines the practice of erasing woman not only from literary narratives but also from the course of history. Her agenda of feminism allows her to look at various gender stereotypes that are embedded in our culture. Jeanette Winterson comments on this power of poetry to subvert the traditional notion regarding social position of women: “Men and women alike know that more than half the world is female but men and women alike forget it every day. It takes a poet to jog our memory.”<sup>94</sup> But gender inequality is not the only socio-political issue she addresses. She also draws attention to the problem of wealth and property and how it has always been a motivation that drives the actions of people and, in the case of “Mrs Midas”, mainly men.

### **3.3 “from Mrs Tiresias”**

Turning a man into a woman for seven years as a form of punishment – a premise from Greek mythology that seems to be loudly calling for a contemporary feminist rendering. Even though the figure of Tiresias may not be such a well-known figure in the popular culture as is King Midas, this myth is deeply rooted in literary history, being alluded to in many notable works throughout the centuries, such as Dante’s *Inferno*, or what is regarded as the masterpiece of Modernism, *The Waste Land* by T.S. Eliot. Therefore, Carol Ann Duffy’s choice to use this figure and provide the readers with a feminist perspective on it, is again a method of encouraging the readers to re-consider the myths and stories they grew up with and that are so imbedded in their literary consciousness.

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<sup>94</sup> Winterson, “Jeanette Winterson on the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy.”

### 3.3.1 Female body without the feminine experience

From the very beginning of the poem, Carol Ann Duffy uses the most notorious image of Tiresias – the transformation of his sex from male to female as his punishment. The words used by Duffy suggest that this change occurred on the level of physique only: “he went out for his walk a man / and came home female.”<sup>95</sup> In the choice of words ‘man’ and ‘female’, she is echoing the radical message of Simone de Beauvoir “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”<sup>96</sup> So in the case of Tiresias, he is only physically changed, therefore “came home female”<sup>97</sup>, not a ‘woman’, emphasizing that the shift is only the beginning, not the final stage of developing into a woman because one would need the feminine experience to actually become a woman. We as readers see the transformation through the eyes of the speaker of the poem, Mrs Tiresias, therefore, her experience contours the whole poem. Duffy’s use of contemporary and quite simplistic language contributes to the transfer of emotional baggage that the speaker of the poem carries onto the readers. This transfer of emotion is successfully achieved through the use of the single lines that Duffy inserts between the stanzas – they are authentic, sometimes even ironic remarks stemming from the experience of Mrs Tiresias, creating almost a feeling of annoyance at the actions of her husband/wife.

The experience of the physical transformation of Tiresias, being set in the modern era, is conveyed to the readers through the focalization of his wife, Mrs Tiresias (a figure that does not appear in any of the previous versions of this myth). His metamorphosis into a female is a completely startling experience for Mrs Tiresias. One gets almost disturbed by the descriptions the speaker offers us, such as “The eyes were the same”<sup>98</sup>, reflecting the uncanny, as he is utterly changed and, simultaneously, the same as before. The reference to his eyes also alludes to the

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<sup>95</sup> Carol Ann Duffy, “*from Mrs Tiresias*,” in *The World’s Wife* (London: Picador, 2017), 14.

<sup>96</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 273.

<sup>97</sup> Duffy, “*from Mrs Tiresias*,” 14.

<sup>98</sup> Duffy, “*from Mrs Tiresias*,” 15.

ability of clairvoyance that is commonly attributed to him. The poem continuously feeds on the visual aspects that add to the portrayal of the female/feminine experience. Duffy does not hesitate to delve into topics concerning womanhood that are still widely considered taboo, such as menstruation. Though, by reversion of the roles, formerly masculine Tiresias now undergoing it, it suddenly seems like a theme that should be openly discussed. By the depiction of Tiresias' inability to endure menstruation without help, Duffy is emphasizing the common experience of many women, when they are expected to bear it in silence, not drawing attention to their pain, nor themselves. By portraying the loud complaining of Tiresias, she is underlining the silence of women enduring pain, as them voicing it might be viewed as discomfoting.

The use of this 'all-knowing' character enables Carol Ann Duffy to turn the conventional narratives on themselves, as a man now appears in the position of a female – this provides a rich background for shedding the light on expectations that are confining women and also on the steady presence of double standards that the society has for masculine and feminine behaviour. By employing a language that is highly playful in its aural nature, the poet also highlights the importance of the speaker, indicating that there is a general tendency to approach the same words differently when they are uttered by a man, versus a woman. Play with the possibilities and limits of the English language continues when Duffy applies different pronouns to the figure of Tiresias, visible especially in the lines "telling the women out there / how, as a woman himself / he knew how they felt."<sup>99</sup> The paradoxical use of the nouns and pronouns reveal the paradoxical nature of Tiresias himself/herself. The continuous use of the masculine pronoun suggests what he considers to be his true gender. It is not only the pronouns that are betraying him, but also his voice – "The one thing he never got right."<sup>100</sup> Tiresias is therefore oscillating between the two sexes, refusing to accept his female sex, as if it was a

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<sup>99</sup> Duffy, "*from Mrs Tiresias*," 16.

<sup>100</sup> Duffy, "*from Mrs Tiresias*," 17.

weakness. His stance reflects the idea of masculine tendency to resist femininity that Cixous presents in *The Laugh of the Medusa*: “it’s up to him to say where his masculinity and femininity are at: this will concern us once men have opened their eyes and seen themselves clearly.”<sup>101</sup> But Tiresias withholds from opening his eyes and seeing the new self into which he has to grow. He only accepts it as a pose, especially in situations when his female body can draw attention of the male gaze – making use of the pervasive sexualization of female bodies in the society and mass culture.

### 3.3.2 Portrayal of sexuality and same-sex relationships

Susanna Braund argues that Duffy’s characterization of Tiresias and the reversal of gender roles also offer her a space “to comment on modern bigotry against same-sex relationships.”<sup>102</sup> As the relationship of the speaker with her husband that has turned into wife becomes complicated, sexuality and attraction develop as the central themes of this poem. The possibility of love that was between them seems now completely lost. The line “*Don’t kiss me in public*”<sup>103</sup> exemplifies the conflicting nature of Tiresias himself. His stance towards love is affected by homophobia, be it his internalized homophobia, or the homophobic comments of the people around them, as he says that “*I don’t want folk getting the wrong idea.*”<sup>104</sup> He is afraid that people might think that he is in a homosexual relationship, when, still at heart, he considers himself a heterosexual. But this internalized homophobia turns against him, as he needs to be in a relationship with other men to appear heterosexual. Whereas Mrs Tiresias explored her sexuality, for Tiresias, his relationships are all about appearances rather than who he truly wants to be with. The two contrasting attitudes to homoerotic tendency are examined in the description of the time when Mrs Tiresias’ lover met with Tiresias, still in his female

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<sup>101</sup> Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 877.

<sup>102</sup> Braund, ““We’re here too, the ones without names,”” 198.

<sup>103</sup> Duffy, “*from Mrs Tiresias*,” 16.

<sup>104</sup> Duffy, “*from Mrs Tiresias*,” 16.

body – yet his gaze stayed male, staring at the lover, and enumerating her features as one would with an object. Carol Ann Duffy used the double-nature of Tiresias to comment on the prejudice of society to a same-sex relationship, and how this affects individuals who had internalized these prejudices. Antony Rowland notes that “the poem’s closure then abandons the jealous Theban for a celebration of the wife’s lesbian lover.”<sup>105</sup> This shift in the focus of the poem creates an impactful effect as Tiresias is standing in opposition to the expressions of someone who is totally comfortable in their sexuality, which is the speaker of the poem, Mrs Tiresias, thus as Braund suggests

in a bold and transgressive move, Duffy reinterprets the secret of who enjoys sex the more, man or woman (Tiresias says it is the woman), by proposing that female–female sexual pleasure surpasses any other.<sup>106</sup>

While the focalizer and speaker of the poem is Mrs Tiresias, the focus of the poem is on the transformation of her husband into a woman and how this change affected her. This contrast of the speaker being confidently feminine while Tiresias is being extremely anxious in the female body, highlights the stereotypical attitude that female bodies are inferior to the male ones. Exploiting the original premise of the myth, that being a woman is a form of punishment or a curse, Carol Ann Duffy exaggeratedly accentuates the still prevalent idea of women as the weaker sex, and at the same time, manages to subvert it. The subversion is done not only through utilizing the expressions related to gender in the English language, but also through reversing the roles of men and women which creates a series of contrasts.

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<sup>105</sup> Antony Rowland, “Love and Masculinity in the Poetry of Carol Ann Duffy.” *English* 50, no. 198 (September 1, 2001): 213. <https://doi.org/10.1093/english/50.198.199>.

<sup>106</sup> Braund, ““We’re here too, the ones without names,”” 199.

### 3.4 “Mrs Faust”

Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is not the only source that Carol Ann Duffy exploited as the basis for her feminist dramatic monologues of *The World’s Wife*. She probed the literary consciousness of the Western culture with the aim to find figures that the readers would be well acquainted with and that would offer her the needed space to disassemble the narratives in order to illuminate the prejudices and stereotypes that are inherent in those tales. The legend of Faust, originating in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, has been since then a direct source of inspiration for a number of well-known literary works, ranging across genres and national literatures. In his *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*, Pierre Brunel notes that

The later stages of its development offer numerous, varied examples of the interaction between literature and political events or collective attitudes and illustrate the interplay between stereotyped truisms inherited from the past and texts that perpetuate the living myth.<sup>107</sup>

Similarly to other tales that Carol Ann Duffy chose to re-work in her poetry collection, also her rendering of the Faustian legend presents a new, modern perspective that reflects the contemporary attitudes to the ‘timeless’ theme and socioeconomic climate of the late 1990s. By making Mrs Faust the speaker of the poem, she adds a voice to this legend that was previously absent, therefore including an angle that would consider the feminine experience.

Already the first two lines of the poem are closely tied to the title of the whole collection and the idea of inserting wife figures into the narratives: “First things first – / I married Faust.”<sup>108</sup> Their allusion to the title *The World’s Wife* is undeniable. The position of the woman is reduced to her relationship with a man, therefore the first information she is expected to give

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<sup>107</sup> Brunel, *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*, 431.

<sup>108</sup> Duffy, “Mrs Faust,” 23.

when introducing herself. When writing on poetry of Carol Ann Duffy, Jeanette Winterson highlighted the role and power of the title of the whole collection and the individual poems:

The title of *The World's Wife* is both a tacit understanding that it's (still) a man's world, and a joke on the world's most popular dedication: To My Wife. [...] Our language pictures are inherently patriarchal – unless challenged. But the fact that three simple title-words can be the challenger affirms the power of language to disclose the unthought norm.<sup>109</sup>

It is indeed a man's world in which Mrs Faust has to find her footing – the speaker of the poem, wife of the legendary figure, seems to have found a way of adapting to it as she is not portrayed too differently from her husband. Driven by both hunger for success and greed for wealth and luxury, she refuses to be a passive wife that would let her husband enjoy life alone while she would wait for him at home. In Mrs Faust, Duffy does not create a character that would be an antithesis of an overly ambitious man, but rather a woman who is not lacking in this aspect and could rival his ambitions: “Faust's face / was clever, greedy, slightly mad. / I was as bad.”<sup>110</sup> Carol Ann Duffy does not hesitate to depict also the faulty sides of women characters, painting them as unsympathetic – that in itself has a potential to be subversive to the expected roles of women, mainly the stereotype of a ‘good and obedient wife’.

### **3.4.1 Language and structure reflecting the theme**

The language of the poem is in itself quite economical – the short sentences, sometimes even without a proper verb or subject, create a pounding rhythm that adds to the feeling of fast life focused on the hunt for success. Duffy utilizes the poetic device of enumeration and gradation to evoke the feeling of the possibility of always achieving and obtaining more. The items on the lists seem to be growing in prize, the professions in importance and the experience

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<sup>109</sup> Winterson, “Jeanette Winterson on the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy.”

<sup>110</sup> Duffy, “Mrs Faust,” 23.

in value. But there is one thing that remains static, not growing, being minimized even – and that is the speaker’s happiness and love she receives from her husband, exemplified in the lines “I grew to love the lifestyle, / not the life. / He grew to love the kudos, / not the wife.”<sup>111</sup> This alternating rhyme pattern and parallel structure positions the attitudes of the two partners against each other, as they are both facing a relationship in which they are stuck without much joy or satisfaction stemming from it. Even when uttering a harsh statement about the state of the relationship, the language used is without additional pathos that would emotionally attack the readers, rather the simplicity and directness of the phrases is what creates the impact.

The lines cited above are not the only paralleling structure utilized in the poem. In fact, the structure of the whole poem is very symmetrical, employing stanzas of the same length, specifically nine lines, throughout. Even though her rhymes are not always following the anticipated patterns, Duffy uses them heavily, especially where they can add to the comic or ironic effect of the experience of the speaker. The regularity of the form ties in with the state of the relationship of Mrs Faust and her husband. Though not conventional by any means, it proves to be quite repetitive. The seemingly never-ending process of seeking something more, of the hunt for success becomes a regularity, creating a stereotype in the end. This repetitive nature of their actions is played with in the penultimate stanza, where the lists become just “et cet, et cet”.<sup>112</sup> The lists of their achievements are so oversaturated that they start to lose their worth.

### **3.4.2 Feminine and masculine attitude to wealth and success**

Duffy’s “Mrs Faust” is moved to a modern setting, to a capitalist world that is driven by the belief in economic prosperity and individual success. The climate of this setting pushes people into to the hunt for wealth and fame to the degree that there is almost no need for the

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<sup>111</sup> Duffy, “Mrs Faust,” 23.

<sup>112</sup> Duffy, “Mrs Faust,” 27.

Devil to tempt Faust to sell his soul, as he seems to have already parted with it, mindlessly pursuing power and authority. Both Mrs Faust and her husband, unsatisfied with their marriage, seek luxury and wealth that would fill the emotional void that is left by the mediocrity of their relationship. This eternal theme of search for some higher meaning in their life is rendered new, as a result of Duffy suggesting modern consequences for this ancient quest. Her references to the Internet or possibility of cloning ironically shed light on the absurdity of this masculine foray that would expect to surpass humanity. Winterson notes that “It’s Faust who has amassed world-pools of cash but she’s happy enough to spend it,”<sup>113</sup> suggesting that Mrs Faust had no intentions of attaining immense power or authority, but rather she focused on the present and the possibilities that the money creates for her. She still has hunger, but one can deduce that it is not so much for wealth, but more for love and happiness from the man that abandoned her emotionally, although they started this journey together. And yet, Faust found his focus elsewhere, seeking to conquer the world: “Next thing, the world, / as Faust said, / spread its legs.”<sup>114</sup> The metaphor uttered by the voice of Faust stems from the view that the role of women is to be overcome by masculine power, similarly as the world should be weak at the knees when facing his power.

The account and enumerations in the poem develop from their joint success, then Mrs Faust is pushed to the background, as she only narrates the achievements of her husband, but in the middle of the poem, she reclaims her voice back and positions herself and her own experience as the main focal point. The poem is therefore divided into parts with different focus, mirroring the way in which Mrs Faust is separated from her husband, living life on her own, by her own terms: “As for me, / I went my own sweet way.”<sup>115</sup> And the way, has indeed been sweet, enjoying all the luxuries she can afford, deciding not to dwell too much on the lack of

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<sup>113</sup> Winterson, “Jeanette Winterson on the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy.”

<sup>114</sup> Duffy, “Mrs Faust,” 24.

<sup>115</sup> Duffy, “Mrs Faust,” 25.

attention she gets from her husband, as she replaced his physical warmth with the warmth of holiday destinations she can afford to visit. When the Devil comes to drag her husband to Hell, Mrs Faust seems to be somewhat familiar with him: “tasted evil, knew its smell”<sup>116</sup> – possibly there was a fraction of the Devil already in Faust, or perhaps it is the ostentatious lifestyle that has made them acquainted with the evil manners. Altering the 16<sup>th</sup> century idea slightly, Faust and his 1990s visions of success made him soulless, thus there was no need for the Devil. “The clever, cunning, callous bastard / didn’t have a soul to sell.”<sup>117</sup> As for Mrs Faust, the experience she narrates is not too dissimilar from the account of Faust himself, suggesting that for a woman to be truly seen and heard in the modern world, she has to become accustomed to the ways of men, mimic them in order to find her own place.

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<sup>116</sup> Duffy, “Mrs Faust,” 27.

<sup>117</sup> Duffy, “Mrs Faust,” 27.

## Chapter 4 – Feminine transformation of legends and fairytales

The narratives on which Carol Ann Duffy based her dramatic monologues in *The World's Wife* do not come only from the time of Antiquity. She explores the literary history up to the later 20<sup>th</sup> century in order to find stories that permeate the Western literary consciousness the most. It is not only the revered classical authors that she chose as her source material, but she also re-tells legends and tales from the Medieval and Early Modern periods that have through centuries infiltrated into the Western oral culture. This chapter will be focused precisely on the women who first appeared in fairytales, as is the case with the poems “Little Red-Cap” and “Mrs Beast”, or a figure from a medieval legend, one that has been veiled in mystery for centuries, as in the case of “Pope Joan”. These poems offer a new perspective on the tales commonly told to children, as Duffy scrutinizes the original narrative and picks out the moments that would provide her with a basis for subversion. She illuminates the parts of these legends or fairytales that are inherently sexist or even misogynistic and she disrupts them in order to remodel and re-tell them anew with a feminist agency in mind.

### 4.1 “Little Red-Cap”

The opening and one of the most frequently analysed poems of *The World's Wife*, “Little Red-Cap” provides a new perspective on the classic fairytale, popularized in the collections by the Brothers Grimm. Carol Ann Duffy’s feminist version, not dissimilar to Angela Carter’s short story “The Company of Wolves” from her collection *The Bloody Chamber*, builds its novel view of this tale on the original’s most notorious element – young girl venturing into the forest alone and finding a devious wolf instead of her grandmother. Duffy takes all these elements but dismantles the original connecting tissue, creating a provocative dramatic monologue instead, as in her version, Little Red-Cap’s stay within the forest is prompted by her sexual awakening as well as the longing for poetry and language through which she could express herself. As the speaker of the poem changes into a woman through her experience and finds her own voice,

this poem sets the tone of the whole collection, structuring a thematic frame for *The World's Wife* feminist aims.

Even though Duffy is not re-telling a Classical myth, the poem's focus, as is the case with many poems in the collection, revolves around the theme of transformation: "It involves the metamorphosis – Ovid's great eponymous theme – from child to adult, and the progressive realisation that changeability and confusion, especially regarding gender and sexuality, do not end there."<sup>118</sup> Already the first lines point to the temporal setting in regards to the speaker of the poem, as she is "At childhood's end,"<sup>119</sup> constructing the depiction of time as a locale through which Little Red-Cap walks as she approaches the forest. Her path towards the forest is marked by growing loneliness and increasing separation from society as she moves through "[...] playing fields, the factory,"<sup>120</sup> and then "the silent railway line, the hermit's caravan, / till you came at last to the edge of the woods."<sup>121</sup> The physical movement of the speaker is symbolic of the progressing transformation into a woman, an experience that she reaches for alone, as she withdraws from the fixed structures of society. And yet, the language of the first stanza points to the fact that she is still hovering between her childhood and adulthood as her first meeting with the wolf occurs on "the edge of the wood,"<sup>122</sup> suggesting a borderland of the different phases of her life.

The wolf is likened to a poet. As she begins to describe the figure of the wolf Little Red-Cap saw him, she uses heavy internal rhymes, strengthening double nature of the wolf/male-poet figure: "reading his verse out loud / in his wolfy drawl, a paperback in his hairy paw, / red wine staining his bearded jaw."<sup>123</sup> Duffy's play with language continues with direct references

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<sup>118</sup> Wainwright, "Female Metamorphoses," 48.

<sup>119</sup> Carol Ann Duffy, "Little Red-Cap," in *The World's Wife* (London: Picador, 2017), 3.

<sup>120</sup> Duffy, "Little Red-Cap," 3.

<sup>121</sup> Duffy, "Little Red-Cap," 3.

<sup>122</sup> Duffy, "Little Red-Cap," 3.

<sup>123</sup> Duffy, "Little Red-Cap," 3.

to the most notorious quotes of the original folk-tale: “What big ears / he had! What big eyes he had! What teeth!”<sup>124</sup> But these words are not spoken with terror here, but rather, they are uttered with a sense of attraction, as Little Red Cap is drawn to this strange figure who possesses power over language. She longs to know him, as she believes he can grant her the entryway to the world in which she would be able to do the same, to use her voice just as the wolf is using his: “The wolf, I knew, would lead me deep into the woods”<sup>125</sup> – therefore, she would leave the edge, half-stuck in the age of silent girlhood, and move towards her adult femininity, as for her, the maturing is connected not only with the sexual awakening, but also with the awakening of her creative potential, symbolized by the forest. Even though that the forest is an alien place for her that might be scary even, it is also the place where she can fulfil her poetic potential, thus she is determined to follow the wolf.

Her sexual awakening is complete as the wolf takes Little Red-Cap’s virginity – this experience is again connected with the poetic, as Libby Hudson suggests:

The wolf gives her a night-time lesson in ‘the love poem’, but when she brings him a precious morning gift, the innocent white dove—symbol, perhaps, of her nascent creative skill—he reduces this to a domestic commonplace: ‘How nice, breakfast in bed’.<sup>126</sup>

Therefore, Little Red Cap chooses to use the wolf’s library, deciding to capitalize on his collection of literature. The tone of the fifth stanza then changes from narrative to more lyrical to accommodate for the speaker’s love and admiration of literature, of the poetic calling she feels – the lines seem to be an ode to literature and poetry: “Words, words were truly alive on the tongue, in the head, / warm, beating, frantic, winged; music and blood.”<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Duffy, “Little Red-Cap,” 3.

<sup>125</sup> Duffy, “Little Red-Cap,” 3.

<sup>126</sup> Hudson, “‘An axe to a willow to see how it wept’,”

<sup>127</sup> Duffy, “Little Red-Cap,” 4.

### 4.1.1 Creative awakening

The penultimate stanza returns to the narrative told by the speaker in her adult and experienced years, looking at her time with the wolf in hindsight, as a fully established poet herself, not needing the wolf to lead her through the world of literature anymore. She sees that the poetry he showed her was repetitive, always about the same topics, always from the same perspective – the male: “[...] a greying wolf / howls the same old song at the moon, year in, year out, / season after season, same rhyme, same reason.”<sup>128</sup> But even in these lines, when the wolf’s poetic abilities are considered negatively, Duffy still utilizes heavy rhyming sounds, perhaps to highlight the traditional approaches the wolf uses in his poetry, refusing to accept any new methods or voices.

Therefore, Little Red-Cap, longing for a new voice, her voice, to emerge, decides to demolish the existing world around her in order to narrate it anew: “I took an axe / to a willow to see how it wept. I took an axe to a salmon / to see how leapt. I took an axe to the wolf / as he slept,”<sup>129</sup> – here, a scheme of internal rhymes is still maintained, even though she is dismantling the world around her. It is only after she destroys the deafening sounds of the male-poet, her rhyming scheme becomes free, less confined by the rigid structures of literary history. Avril Horner suggests that the speaker of the poem “in dispatching the wolf, releases the power of matrilineal legacy as well as her own energy, power and talent.”<sup>130</sup> When she dissects the wolf, she sees “the glistening, virgin white of my grandmother’s bones”<sup>131</sup> – the feminine heritage that the wolf has silenced by his dominant voice. Jeanette Winterson states that “the skeleton of language is female. Deeper, it seems, than our mother tongue.”<sup>132</sup> Upon discovering the presence of this *écriture féminine* stifled by the loud male voice, Little Red-Cap emerges from

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<sup>128</sup> Duffy, “Little Red-Cap,” 4.

<sup>129</sup> Duffy, “Little Red-Cap,” 4.

<sup>130</sup> Horner, “‘Small Female Skull’,” 110.

<sup>131</sup> Duffy, “Little Red-Cap,” 4.

<sup>132</sup> Winterson, “Jeanette Winterson on the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy.”

the forest, usurping the feminine voice: “Out of the forest I come with my flowers, singing, all alone.”<sup>133</sup> The last line provides a contrast with the beginning of the poem and marks the fulfilment of the speaker’s rite of passage – when she walked towards the forest alone, it was in order to find someone who would show her the world of sexuality as well as language. But at the end, her leaving the forest “all alone”<sup>134</sup> symbolizes the realization of her feminine creative potential that does not need any male guidance.

#### 4.2 “Pope Joan”

Thomas F. X. Noble starts his article on the figure of Pope Joan with the words: “I present the story of a woman who never lived but who nevertheless refuses to die.”<sup>135</sup> These words suggest that Pope Joan, even though proved only a figure of medieval imagination already in the Early Modern Period, still continues to speak both to readers and authors, as she repeatedly appears in works of art, ranging from paintings to drama (notably, the 1982 play *Top Girls* by Caryl Churchill appropriates this legendary figure with a feminist aim in mind). As already the original legend of Pope Joan involves an element of subversive power of feminine agency, it is no wonder that Carol Ann Duffy included this figure as one of the speakers of her dramatic monologues in *The World’s Wife*. Duffy’s Catholic upbringing and her later abandonment of faith<sup>136</sup> provides an ideal background for the creation of a poem that not only celebrates this female heroine, but also examines and challenges the workings of the strict male-dominated hierarchy of the Catholic Church. As with other poems in this collection, also “Pope Joan” presents a feminist re-telling of a well-known legend, and at the same time, offers an exploration

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<sup>133</sup> Duffy, “Little Red-Cap,” 4.

<sup>134</sup> Duffy, “Little Red-Cap,” 4.

<sup>135</sup> Noble, Thomas F. X., “Why Pope Joan?” *Catholic Historical Review* 99, no. 2 (April 2013): 219. doi:10.1353/cat.2013.0078

<sup>136</sup> Varty, “Carol Ann Duffy: The edge has become the centre,” 127-128.

of other cultural and social phenomena associated with the patriarchal world – in this case, it is the structure and power balance of the Church organization.

In this poem, Carol Ann Duffy relies on her audience and their familiarity with the legend itself, as she does not present the full story and background of this legendary heroine, but rather focuses on the subversive essence that is inherent in the existence of such a female legendary figure. Jacques LeGoff notes that Pope Joan

embodied the fear of women that was disseminated by the Church, and especially the fear that women might intrude into the Church itself. As part of the historical movement through which the Church ensured papal omnipotence, Joan was the reverse-image of a pope: a female pope.<sup>137</sup>

This dramatic monologue presents Pope Joan already in the position of highest power and rank in the Catholic Church and the speaker, Joan herself, as in the other poems in this collection, speaks to a female audience: “so I tell you now, / daughters or brides of the Lord”.<sup>138</sup> Pope Joan addresses the women only by their roles, referencing the title of the whole collection, but modifying it a little to better fit the religiously marked language of this specific poem.

#### **4.2.1 Feminine intrusion of men’s world**

Pope Joan does not hesitate to fully exhibit her acquainted power, seemingly revelling in it even more due to the fact that she, as a cross-dressed woman, managed to surpass all the men longing for the same position. Duffy emphasizes her seat at the top of the Church hierarchy by a poetic device typical for her – the use of enumeration. By listing all the levels of the Church professions, she highlights how many men Joan actually managed to exceed, continuously rising in position, when she was unanimously elected the Pope<sup>139</sup>: “nearer to heaven / than

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<sup>137</sup> Jacques Le Goff, “Pope Joan,” in *Heroes and Marvels of the Middle Ages*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (London: Reaktion Books, Limited, 2020), 138, accessed June 25, 2024, ProQuest Ebook Central

<sup>138</sup> Carol Ann Duffy, “Pope Joan,” in *The World’s Wife* (London: Picador, 2017), 68.

<sup>139</sup> Noble, “Why Pope Joan?” 220.

cardinals, archbishops, bishops, priests / being Vicar of Rome / having made the Vatican my home, / like the best of men, / in nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti amen,<sup>140</sup> – uttering these words in Latin, something commonly said when crossing oneself conjures up the sense that speaker is asking for God’s blessing, even protection when she mentions the men. Considering the prevalent male-mocking tone of the whole collection, this gesture can be read as quite satirical as it is often made by Catholics when they see something that might be considered unlucky.

The language of the poem ironically appropriates Christian language, especially phrases and expressions of the Catholic mass. Duffy mentions in her interview for *The Independent* that “The beginning of a poem is always a moment of tiny revelation, a new way of seeing something, which almost simultaneously attracts language to it.”<sup>141</sup> Faithful to her comment, also the first line of “Pope Joan” points to the frame of the whole poem. It refers to one of the greatest mysteries of the Christian faith: transubstantiation. But here, it does not point only to the segment of a mass, but also evokes its connotations with transformation in general: “After I learned to transubstantiate / unleavened bread / into the sacred host”<sup>142</sup> – by moving the object of the clause to the second line, Duffy invites the reading of the first line as a separate entity, pointing to Joan herself, and the several transformations associated with her: first, the visual transformation from female to male by change of her appearance, secondly her advancement in the power structures of the Church and eventually becoming the Pope, and lastly, her transformation into a mother. The words of the poem do not refer solely to language of the mass, but they also contain symbols, such as “blue-green snakes of smoke / coiled round the

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<sup>140</sup> Duffy, “Pope Joan,” 68.

<sup>141</sup> Carol Ann Duffy, “Carol Ann Duffy: Street-wise heroines at home,” interview by Christina Patterson, *The Independent*, October 1, 1999, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/carol-ann-duffy-streetwise-heroines-at-home-743481.html>

<sup>142</sup> Duffy, “Pope Joan,” 68.

hem of my robe”<sup>143</sup> – even though that snake is a symbol in variety of cultures, one of the conventional Western understandings of it derives from the Bible and the Garden of Eden.<sup>144</sup> Duffy leans into the biblical associations of the serpent tempting and persuading Eve who then forms into a transgressive power that challenges the established order. Joan continues this legacy of biblical women subverting the existing structures, however she does not confront God, but rather the man-dominated order and hierarchy of the Church.

#### **4.2.2 Motherly potential as a tool of subversion**

Possibly Pope Joan’s most remembered act is her becoming a mother, as the whole narrative presents a woman who proves to be undermining the patriarchal structures of the Church, all while pretending to be conforming to them. Already Cixous wrote about the feminine act of complying to the male structures and discourse and interrupting them from within:

If woman has always functioned “within” the discourse of man, a signifier that has always referred back to the opposite signifier which annihilates its specific energy and diminishes or stifles its very different sounds, it is time for her to dislocate this “within,” to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of.<sup>145</sup>

Duffy’s disturbance of the patriarchal hierarchy of the Church from within continuous with her introduction of another subversive aspect to the original legend which is the possibility of Joan abandoning her faith, if not completely, then definitely the faith that is constricted by all the rigid rules of the Church created by men in positions of power: “I came to believe / that I did

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<sup>143</sup> Duffy, “Pope Joan,” 68.

<sup>144</sup> Michael Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 186, Gale Virtual Reference Library  
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xww&AN=120164&lang=cs&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>145</sup> Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 887.

not believe a word,”<sup>146</sup> as Duffy’s Joan relies on a more intimate spirituality, one which she experienced and truly understood only when she gave birth to her child. In the last stanzas of the poem, which portray Joan giving birth to her child. Duffy relies on the elements of the original narrative: “as my baby pushed out / from between my legs / where I lay in the road / in my miracle, / not a man or a pope at all.”<sup>147</sup> The emphasis is both on the revelation that she is a woman and also, significantly, on her transformation into a mother, both of which happened during a religious procession. As the line “in my miracle”<sup>148</sup> is shorter in comparison with the other two lines in the last stanza, it reads as prominent, especially the possessive pronoun ‘my’, accentuating Joan being the creator of the miracle, of her child. This motherly creative potential that she possesses as a woman is for the speaker of the poem above any rank that she could occupy in the patriarchal structure of the Church – intruding the hierarchy and then abandoning it in order to be a woman seems to be the most transgressive act.

### 4.3 “Mrs Beast”

Being the penultimate poem in the whole collection, followed only by the sonnet of motherly love “Demeter”, the poem “Mrs Beast” fulfils the role of a conclusive ode to women and womanhood. Carol Ann Duffy does not structure this poem as a faithful retelling that would follow the most notorious plot elements from the original French tale of *Beauty and the Beast*; rather, she only takes its female protagonist and allows her to stand in the spotlight, using her voice to remember her fellow female characters from myths, fairytales, legends and history – women whose stories are still remembered mostly through a sexist lens, diminishing them to their appearance or tragic fate. The feminist agency is therefore fully acknowledged, paying homage to the feminine in its full complexity.

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<sup>146</sup> Duffy, “Pope Joan,” 68.

<sup>147</sup> Duffy, “Pope Joan,” 68-69.

<sup>148</sup> Duffy, “Pope Joan,” 69.

The poem's, and in reality, the whole collection's aim is clearly stated in the first two lines of the poem: "These myths going round, these legends, fairytales, / I'll put them straight"<sup>149</sup> – the speaker of the poem, Mrs Beast claims the voice that seeks to right the wrongs that literary history has committed on women by either completely silencing them, or skewing their narratives in order to fit the patriarchal and often sexist establishment of the Western culture. Once again Duffy uses poetic enumeration; Mrs Beast lists famous female figures, both historical and literary, women, who are remembered in the cultural consciousness in relation to their beauty. This enumeration at the beginning of a poem seems structurally analogous to the invocation of the Muses in epics, but here, the Muses are specific women, predecessors of Duffy's Mrs Beast whose stories she has on her mind when narrating this poem. She introduces them based on their most prominent and recognized trait, in these cases a physical feature to which they have been reduced throughout history, be that their faces or only eyes: "so when you stare / into my face – Helen's face, Cleopatra's, / Queen of Sheba's, Juliet's – then deeper, / gaze into my eyes – Nefertiti's, Mona Lisa's, / Garbo's eyes – think again."<sup>150</sup> The main voice of the poem invites the reader to face the feminine directly and to see the women fully, as complex human beings, and not to diminish them to a single trait, as it was the case with these figures she mentions. They have been considered femmes fatales for whose beauty men were willing to kill and die. But Mrs Beast encourages the audience to "think again,"<sup>151</sup> in order to reconstruct the narratives that are imbedded in their collective memory and cultural history.

The first stanza is concluded with a more detailed allusion to *The Little Mermaid* tale by Hans Christian Andersen. Even though films and popular culture have turned this tale into an

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<sup>149</sup> Carol Ann Duffy, "Mrs Beast," in *The World's Wife* (London: Picador, 2017), 72.

<sup>150</sup> Duffy, "Mrs Beast," 72.

<sup>151</sup> Duffy, "Mrs Beast," 72.

enchancing fairytale with a happy ending, the story told by Andersen has a grimmer undertone to it, as *The Little Mermaid*'s sacrifice was eventually done in vain:

Her tender feet felt as if cut by sharp knives, but she cared not for it; a sharper pang had pierced through her heart. She knew this was the last evening she should ever see the prince, for whom she had forsaken her kindred and her home; she had given up her beautiful voice, and suffered unheard pain daily for him, while he knew nothing of it.<sup>152</sup>

In an act of feminine solidarity between two fairytale figures, Mrs Beast remembers and retells this tragic element of the original story in a language with a painful, ironic sting, using common metaphors and more unconventional images connected to sea, e.g. her walking in “fishnet tights,”<sup>153</sup> or when referring to the Prince “who’d dump her in the end, chuck her, throw her overboard.”<sup>154</sup> The passage of female collegiality and empathy over her fellow woman who was treated awfully by a man concludes with words of Mrs Beast who has learnt to be wiser than to sacrifice her happiness for a man: “I could have told her – look, love, I should know, / they’re bastards when they’re Princes. / What you want to do is find yourself a Beast.”<sup>155</sup>

#### 4.3.1 Female desires and sexuality

The tone and content of the poem changes in the break between the first and the second stanza, as Mrs Beast abandons the experience of other women for a moment, and recounts her own experience, as a woman who is no longer dictated by men. She narrates this section from a perspective of an independent woman who does not expect to be saved or even supported by her lover, as she can rely on herself completely: “no longer a girl, knowing my own mind, / my own gold stashed in the bank, / my own black horse at the gates<sup>156</sup> – the anaphoric use of “my

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<sup>152</sup> Hans Christian Andersen, *The Little Mermaid* (New York: Cernunnos, 2023), 63, Accessed June 29, 2024. ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>153</sup> Duffy, “Mrs Beast,” 72.

<sup>154</sup> Duffy, “Mrs Beast,” 72.

<sup>155</sup> Duffy, “Mrs Beast,” 72.

<sup>156</sup> Duffy, “Mrs Beast,” 72.

own”<sup>157</sup> serves as an emphasis and confirmation that she is well-established because of her own hard work and skill, not because of some man granting her the riches. At the same time, her words “no longer a girl”<sup>158</sup> admit her former naivety, but it is a trait that has ceased to exist through her experience and understanding of her own value as a woman. Therefore, also the relationship has with the Beast is of her own accord and desire, emphasizing that she will not suffer any mistreatment towards her and nor will she diminish herself and her wants in order to fit his ideal: “my own black horse at the gates / ready to carry me off at one wrong word, / one false move, one dirty look.”<sup>159</sup> The following lines are dedicated to the portrayal of their relationship, not shying away from openly depicting the eager and experienced female sexuality and desires of Mrs Beast – this is done in direct manner with highly suggestive details.

The speaker of the poem is fully in control not only of their relationship, but also of her voice, using it exactly in the extent she wants: “I’ll tell you more.”<sup>160</sup> These are the words of a self-confident woman, one that will not be shamed because of her sexual desires. The power of female voice is continuously referred to in this poem, most notably in the lines: “I had the language, girls. / The lady says Do this. Harder. The lady says / Do that. Faster. The lady says That’s not where I meant. / At last it all made sense.”<sup>161</sup> The words, even though uttered in an immediate context of a sexual experience, point to the larger impact that women can have when they are allowed to speak both in private and public settings, and especially when the world actually listens to them. The repetition of the phrase “the lady says”<sup>162</sup> not only playfully parallels the structure of the classic children game ‘Simon says’, but it also reinforces the notion of women not being afraid to speak out and even to give orders. The feminine agency is further

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<sup>157</sup> Duffy, “Mrs Beast,” 72.

<sup>158</sup> Duffy, “Mrs Beast,” 72.

<sup>159</sup> Duffy, “Mrs Beast,” 72.

<sup>160</sup> Duffy, “Mrs Beast,” 73.

<sup>161</sup> Duffy, “Mrs Beast,” 73.

<sup>162</sup> Duffy, “Mrs Beast,” 73.

pointed to in Duffy's use of vocabulary that in itself involves acting according to one's own wishes: "the pig in my bed / was *invited*."<sup>163</sup> While Mrs Beast refers to herself mostly in relation to her own wishes, the language in which she depicts the Beast is marked mostly by description of his body parts which are totally animalistic: "Here was a bit of him like a horse, a ram, / an ape, a wolf, a dog, a donkey, dragon dinosaur."<sup>164</sup> And yet Mrs Beast does not show any fear when talking about him.

#### 4.3.2 Fellowship of Women

The narrative focus of the poem then shifts again, and Mrs Beast returns to the account of female camaraderie established at the beginning of the poem. Mimicking the formal structure of the first stanza with its enjambments and the following enumeration, friendship between the women characters is here portrayed through a game of Poker. Stan Smith in his chapter on poetry of Carol Ann Duffy mentions that "in Duffy's poetry, gambling – in particular card games, specifically poker, and even more particularly, the shuffling and dealing of hand – is a recurrent metaphor for existence."<sup>165</sup> Here, it not only the existence of an individual, but rather the enjoyment stemming from the existence of a group of female friends, her fellow mythical or legendary characters who are bound by refusing to be afraid of their beastly men: "We were a hard school, tough as fuck, / all of us beautiful and rich – the Woman / who Married a Minotaur, Goldilocks, the Bride / of the Bearded lesbian, Frau Yellow Dwarf, et Moi."<sup>166</sup> Mrs Beast is in awe of her company, admiring their courage as she "watched those wonderful women shuffle and deal"<sup>167</sup> – her sexual relationship with the Beast is in these stanzas

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<sup>163</sup> Duffy, "Mrs Beast," 73.

<sup>164</sup> Duffy, "Mrs Beast," 73.

<sup>165</sup> Stan Smith, "'What Like Is It?' Carol Ann Duffy's *Différance*," in *Poetry & Displacement* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 120.

<sup>166</sup> Duffy, "Mrs Beast," 73.

<sup>167</sup> Duffy, "Mrs Beast," 73.

superseded by the friendship and solidarity she feels when surrounded by her fellow women, suggesting the real power of a female friendship.

The game of cards they play has a symbolic value – the women around Mrs Beast already learnt the hard way how to escape the patriarchal world and play by their own rules. But they are also aware of those women who were not so lucky and were crushed by the male-dominated world. Thus, the stanza of the game of cards serves as a celebration of the power that is now in female hands, while also preparing the frame for the last two stanzas that are an homage to the history of womanhood, acknowledging the suffering and fights that came before their independence and ability to voice themselves: “But behind each player stood a line of ghosts / unable to win.”<sup>168</sup> The language of gambling is maintained, as the courage of these women is highlighted. By another instance of enumeration, specific instances of female literary or historical figures trying to break free from the manacles of the patriarchal society are listed in order to be remembered and celebrated. The list of female figures is interrupted only by the Beast who “came in / with a tray of schnapps at the end of the game”<sup>169</sup> – the man-made and male-dominated game is ended as the cards are now fully in the hands of the women, who will play out their lives according to their desires, not being dictated by men: “Bad girls. Serious ladies. Mourning our dead.”<sup>170</sup>

In this poem, Carol Ann Duffy is not only celebrating the women who were able to conquer the expectations created by the patriarchal society, but she is also paying homage to those who were conquered in the long fight for freedom. The last stanza is an emotional confession of Mrs Beast who is acknowledging their significance and understands that the feminine voice is a product of that long line of women fighting to be heard throughout the

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<sup>168</sup> Duffy, “Mrs Beast,” 74.

<sup>169</sup> Duffy, “Mrs Beast,” 74.

<sup>170</sup> Duffy, “Mrs Beast,” 74.

centuries. The language used is no longer the playful language of excitement and gambling, but rather a display of sentimental and melancholic images of a nighttime contemplation over her existence as a result of the existence of every single woman who came before her. And yet, the sentimentality is discarded in the last words which can be read as the final call for battle: "Let the less-loving one be me."<sup>171</sup> These words point to the commitment to not allow the history to repeat itself, as she longs for a world in which also women can do what they please. After enumerating numerous female figures of myths, legends, fairytales and history, remembered only for their downfall at the hands of men, Mrs Beast refuses to let the girls get hurt again by the world that sees them as mere objects with which it can play.

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<sup>171</sup> Duffy, "Mrs Beast," 75.

## Chapter 5 - Conclusion

This thesis serves as an analysis and exploration of the different methods that Carol Ann Duffy uses in her themed poetry collection *The World's Wife*, specifically how she dismantles gender stereotypes that have permeated Western literary history since the age of Antiquity. Duffy exhibits her vast knowledge of the original sources, as she disassembles the original myths, fairy-tales and legends in order to provide the readers with a new, previously silenced perspective of the feminine, but at the same time, keeping the most notorious elements of the source tales. As these myths and stories are embedded in the literary consciousness, her novel approach helps to illuminate the patriarchal, even sexist ideas that are infused both in the narratives and in the language itself.

By using the form of dramatic monologues, her poetry collection gives voice to the female figures that have been previously silenced. Duffy's heroines are decidedly taking their voices back, as they narrate their stories anew, often in a bitingly satirical language that challenges and questions who the real hero of the original story truly is. In many of the discussed poems, the male figures are humorously undermined, as the speakers highlight their banality, or even liken them to animals. Dowson notes that "although the monologues can seem ingenuous because of their entertainment value, they also confront the formulaic influences of myth by rewriting them with complex psychology not found in the originating stories."<sup>172</sup> The poems do, indeed, explore the feminine psyche in all its complexity, as Duffy refuses to portray her women one-dimensionally or to better their image by neglecting the possible moral flaws they have.

Although the narrative value of these dramatic monologues seems to be the element challenging the original the most, this thesis suggests that Duffy's use of poetic devices and

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<sup>172</sup> Dowson, "Words between Women," 137.

literary tropes also significantly contributes to the subversive value of the poems in *The World's Wife*. In many cases, she does not follow any established structures and creates forms characterized by high degree of freedom, while in other cases, she conforms to rigid structures on the surface but applies her mastery of language in order to disrupt them otherwise, echoing Cixous and her revolutionary essay *The Laugh of the Medusa*:

If woman has always functioned “within” the discourse of man, a signifier that has always referred back to the opposite signifier which annihilates its specific energy and diminishes or stifles its very different sounds, it is time for her to dislocate this “within,” to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of.<sup>173</sup>

It is especially her witty use of phrases and expressions relating to the original and playing with literary clichés that manages to render the myths, legends, and fairytales current. Therefore, both her narrative re-telling and her poetic devices appropriate the original tales with a feminist agency in mind.

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<sup>173</sup> Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 887.

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## Summary

Myths, especially those of Greco-Roman antiquity, are seen as the cornerstones of the Western culture and its values. Even today, many parts of our lives are constructed around their basis, as they are embedded in our consciousness. But these myths are centred around a male gaze on the world – this is something what the poems, especially those disassembling and re-arranging mythical stories, in the collection *The World's Wife* by Carol Ann Duffy seek to undermine. The aim of my thesis is to examine the process in which the poetic language is able to subvert the prevalent patriarchal view on the Western world originating already in the times of Classical Antiquity, and continuing to be expressed in tales and narratives throughout the history, until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, vocabulary in itself has come to be embedded and with meanings that reflect the centuries long social order. Duffy is re-focalizing the mythical and legendary narratives through the female gaze and changing the perspective of how they are commonly understood. Through this, the words loaded with centuries old meanings are disrupted and contested. As these stories are so well known, they offer great ground for the distortion of their narrative through the contemporary lens and also illumination of characters, mainly women, who were pushed to the background. The poetic devices and the aspects of the ancient myths, fairy-tales, and legends which were changed or added to the narratives in the poems of Carol Ann Duffy are examined in the context of gender theory, with the focus on the feminist perspective, based mainly on the notions of Helene Cixous and her text *The Laugh of the Medusa*, as for Cixous it is precisely poetry that offers the greatest space for the repressed to write and insert themselves into history.

## **Key Words**

Carol Ann Duffy

*The World's Wife*

feminist poetry

subversion

re-telling

literary appropriation

Greco-Roman myths

legends

fairy-tales

female perspective

contemporary perspective

## Resumé

Mýty, zejména ty z řecko-římského starověku, jsou považovány za základní kameny západní kultury a jejích hodnot. I dnes je velká část našich životů postavena na jejich základech, protože jsou zakotveny v našem vědomí. Tyto mýty se však soustředí kolem mužského pohledu na svět – to je něco, co se snaží básně, zejména ty, které rozebírají a znovu uspořádávají mýtické příběhy, rozvrátit ve sbírce *The World's Wife* od Carol Ann Duffy. Cílem mé bakalářské práce je prozkoumat proces, ve kterém je poetický jazyk schopen podvracet převládající patriarchální pohled na západní svět, který pochází již z dob klasické antiky, a který se nadále projevuje v příbězích a vyprávěních do 20. století. Slovní zásoba sama je tak protkaná významy, které odrážejí staletí trvající společenský řád. Duffy převrací perspektivu mýtických a legendárních příběhů a převyprávěním těchto příběhů z ženské perspektivy tak mění pohled na to, jak jsou běžně chápány. Díky tomu jsou slova nabitá staletí starými významy narušena a zpochybňována. Jelikož jsou tyto příběhy tak známé, nabízejí velký prostor pro zkreslení svého vyprávění soudobou optikou a také osvětlení postav, především žen, které byly odsunuty do pozadí. Básnické prostředky a aspekty starověkých mýtů, pohádek a legend, které byly změněny nebo přidány do vyprávění v básních Carol Ann Duffy, jsou zkoumány v kontextu genderové teorie se zaměřením na feministickou perspektivu, založenou především na myšlenkách Helene Cixous a jejím textu *The Laugh of the Medusa*, protože pro Cixous je to právě poezie, která nabízí potlačovaným největší prostor pro psaní a vkládání se do historie.

## **Klíčová slova**

Carol Ann Duffy

*The World's Wife*

feministická poezie

subverze

převyprávění

literární apropriace

řecko-římské mýty

legendy

pohádky

ženská perspektiva

současná perspektiva