

Abstract

This essay explores how Carol Ann Duffy's poetry collection *The World's Wife* (1999) engages with the neglected narratives of female characters in historical, mythological and fictional stories. It provides an overview of Duffy's background, the different elements that influence her work, her style and her previous works. The essay also examines neglected women in the past and how Duffy, by highlighting their narrative in the previously male-centred stories, succeeds in giving them back their voice and consequently their identity. By underlining the women's narrative, Duffy shows how different perspectives can change a story and how an inclusion of women's narratives can change one's perception of historical events or mythological legends. Duffy succeeds in making these stories, despite their distant origin, feel closer to the reader with the use of dramatic monologues and by using simple but effective language. Duffy's employment of a modern setting for the stories also contributes to the resonance it might have with the modern reader as it creates the notion that these stories are something that might happen today. The ways in which Duffy criticises patriarchal conventions and societies in her poems are discussed while focusing on how Duffy highlights her female characters' negative feelings about their partners which are used to portray the toxic and hegemonic masculinity. Here Duffy is both criticising the society the original stories took place in and at the same time exploring current societal pressures and conventions that are not as far from the past as one might think. By focusing on stories distant in time, Duffy manages to highlight not only women's suffering from injustice in the past but also the current problems women face. This she manages to do by focusing on social issues such as gender equality and capitalism within the stories, with humour and well thought out words.

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Introduction

Throughout history, women have been almost invisible in literature and in historical recording. In patriarchal societies, women were for a long time seen as inferior to, and even the property of, men. As Elaine Showalter states in *A Literature of Their Own*, women were seen as “sociological chameleons” as they had to take on the lifestyle, class and culture of the men around them (Showalter, 11). Their purpose was to follow, serve and love their assigned male partner whether they desired to or not. Moreover, their voices have been diminished by glorious stories of men in history who have been celebrated for centuries. This applies to actual events as well as mythology which influence people’s actions and the fiction that were created by the men. There were of course a few rare instances of famous female characters who were independently recognized but that is more the subject of tokenism rather than the rule itself. The recognition of a few women was considered enough to reach the minimum standard of representation and perceived equality.

Carol Ann Duffy is a former Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom as well as a feminist poet. Her poems have been influential in both feminist and postmodern literature. She is openly lesbian, which sometimes influences her poetry, especially her love poems where she defies the heteronormal convention that has been dominant in the genre of love poetry. Because of this, she is sometimes categorized as a lesbian poet, which is an oversimplification when considering the intersectionality of her as a person as she does not only write from her perspective as a lesbian but also from the perspective of being a woman and from the working class. She has said that “If I am a lesbian icon and a role model, that’s great, but if it’s a word that is used to reduce me, then you have to ask why someone would want to reduce me” (Lyal). She has published, almost annually, a number of books of poetry, such as *Bees* (2011), *Mean Time* (1993) and *Rapture* (2005) (Mhana).

This essay focuses on the neglect of women in the historical, mythological and fictional events that Duffy’s poetry collection *The World’s Wife* (1999) refers to while using modern settings to highlight the feminist portrayal of the stories which the poems reference. The essay also discusses Duffy’s rebellion against patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity and emphasises the significance of how women in the poems under scrutiny react to their male partners. Through the poems in *The World’s Wife*, Carol Ann Duffy flips the power dynamic

between the men and the women in historical, mythological or fictional events by focusing solely on the female narrative.

Background: Neglected Narratives of Women

Simone de Beauvoir wrote in her book *The Second Sex*: “Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth” (de Beauvoir 162). History is written by the winners or the ruling class in each society. Unfortunately, patriarchy has been the dominant feature of almost every society in history with only a few exceptions. This means that the representation of women was for a long time solely based on men’s ideas concerning the order of the world and gender dynamics. With increased women’s rights and situations where women’s voices can be heard, there is more representation of women’s experiences and women’s voices. Before the first wave of feminism women had been regarded as an additional decoration for men, either serving as a wife, mother, daughter or a mistress. De Beauvoir wrote: “For him she is sex-absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other” (de Beauvoir xxviii). A woman was not perceived as a human being but rather as “the other,” which degrades women’s status almost to the level of animals. Note that William Shakespeare and his works are famous worldwide, but his wife remains a footnote in the myriad of texts that discuss his art and life. The reason behind the wife’s absence in such texts is the fact that the writers of those texts were men. Even when the occasional woman got the chance to express herself through writing literature or recording contemporary events, she was still a member of a patriarchal society and therefore it was difficult for her to split from its ideology and traditions and do something new. Similarly to Anne Hathaway, William Shakespeare’s wife, Mrs. Freud is only known for marrying the famous psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. However, unlike Anne, she loses her name after her marriage and consequently her identity as well.

Then there are the subjects of mythology and religion. Belief systems all originate in some way in the minds of people, i.e., men. Because of men’s influence on these belief systems and its impact on developing and recording them throughout history, these stories

become heavily male-centred. Women are either depicted as men's accessories or function as tools to show the evil nature of women's independence. An example of men's representation of a woman as an accessory is seen in the story of Midas and his golden touch. His wife is merely mentioned to emphasise the foolishness of his wish and there is no effort made to develop her as a real character. The depiction of women as evil creatures is rooted in their independence from the male figures around them. Examples of this are stories in Greek mythology about independent female characters such as Circe and Medusa who are wronged by other male gods and are punished. However, they do not let the men around them control their fate and take their lives into their own hands. Both Circe and Medusa are depicted as cruel monsters for their actions while similar actions by men are rated as heroic and courageous. It was not until women began to play a bigger part in the literary scene that things started to change. Elaine Showalter talks about "authentically female literature" as works by women which portray a "woman's view of life, woman's experience" (Showalter 35). It was difficult for men to write from the perspective of women, although not impossible. However, they did not consider women's ability to write, especially about their own experiences and from their perspective, until the first wave of the feminist movement exhibited their talent and capability.

Despite criticising the elements that were the main focus of both the first and second waves of feminism, Duffy's works could be considered as being written from the perspective of the third and even in some way the fourth waves as she has been living with the improvements these first waves made and is therefore writing within all of them. She is able to compare her current society and the developments in gender equality that have occurred over the last decades to other periods of history wherein women's rights were very limited. Postmodernism also influences her poetry, and notably the poetry collection focused on here, *The World's Wife*. Here she explores the narrative of the losers, in this case the women, as opposed to the winners, the men. As *The World's Wife* focuses on history, fictional and mythological events, which are all entities that are formed or documented by men, Duffy engages with the reliability and the accuracy of these accounts by looking at the hidden characters within these stories. Postmodernism in literature centres around reflection of the past in order to analyse it from a new perspective (Barry 92-93). In *The World's Wife*, Duffy combines the recent improvements that have been made in the fight for gender equality and

the reflective nature of postmodernism as she reflects on women's role in historical, mythological and fictional stories with a hint of personal experience from her own life.

Carol Ann Duffy and *The World's Wife*

Carol Ann Duffy is a Scottish poet born in 1955 in Glasgow to working class parents. After her family moved to England, she grew up in the English Midlands and later moved to Liverpool (Michelis 1). Duffy was brought up as a Catholic but became an atheist at the age of fifteen. She lacked interest in school subjects, except English, which she attributes to two of her English teachers. Her later poems focus on this period in her life, as she writes about her schooldays and the feelings of teenagers (Forbes). She is one of the few living poets taught in most schools in Britain today although this fact has faced some criticism. The mentioning of knives in the poem "Education for Leisure" led to its banishment from the curriculum as it might encourage some undesired behaviour from the students (Curtis). However, the poem itself is anti-violence and pro-education, seeking to drive home its message through shocking imagery. From the age of fourteen, Duffy had decided to become a poet. Although she dabbled in other fields of writing such as playwriting, poetry was always her passion (Forbes). She met Adrian Henri, a fellow poet, in 1971 and followed him to Liverpool University to study philosophy (Michelis 1). They started dating and it is believed her first works were influenced by him although it has become more evident through the years that this might not have been the case (Forbes). "Little Red-Cap", the first poem in her book *The World's Wife* (1999), relates to this period of her life, which she spent with Henri. They were a couple until 1982 (Roche-Jacues 367). Her first work to attract some attention was *Standing Female Nude*, published 1985, and since then she has been publishing books of poetry almost annually (Scottish Poetry Library). In 1995, she decided to have a baby on her own, with no involvement from the father. A year later she moved in with her now ex-partner Jackie Kay, where they lived together and raised their children (Forbes).

Duffy has explained that a part of her writing style is using simple and common words to create something far greater. This colloquial language is typical of her writing style and is often useful to make distant feelings, situations or stories more relatable to the reader. Duffy

published *The World's Wife* in 1999, which changed her audience such that a more wide-ranging group of readers began reading her works. Critics of the book suggest that she wrote it to entertain herself and others around her with retellings of stories from the perspective of great men's wives, which might be regarded as Duffy's metaphorical autobiography (Rees-Jones 27). It consists of dramatic monologues in which these wives relate their stories to the reader in a colloquial manner as if talking to a friend. The book was a huge success and has beaten record numbers for books of poetry (Forbes). Duffy was appointed the Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom in 2009 and held that title until 2019. She is the first woman to hold this title in its 400-year-old history (Scottish Poetry Library).

Deryn Rees-Jones discusses Carol Ann Duffy's influence on British poetry. She argues that Duffy is one of the key factors of a change that has taken place (Rees-Jones 1). Duffy has been pivotal in the development of poetry as she implements more everyday language in her poetry and explores the patterns and rhythms of everyday non-standard English. By using simple words she can tackle many difficult subjects such as domestic violence and the complexities of love. Rees-Jones also argues that Duffy's writing is more post-feminist than feminist as she is writing from the point where the first, second and third waves of feminism have come and gone and have changed society radically when it comes to women's rights. As corollary of that, Duffy's intention is not to write feminist poems; it is rather her message that can be interpreted as a message of feminism (Rees-Jones 2). Because of Duffy's lack of feminist identification and since she is not tied down to any particular agenda, she discusses women's experience as well as the effects of patriarchy and gender issues. This allows her to create discussions around her diverse topics. Her use of dramatic monologues also highlights the challenges others may face as she often gives voice to those that had none before (Rees-Jones 3). Her use of the dramatic monologue also distances her from the speakers in the poems and gives her freedom to explore difficult subjects (Rees-Jones 18, 26). In *The World's Wife*, the dramatic monologue manages to convey a distinct feminist message at the same time as being very distant, since the poems are retellings of myths and historical characters. By combining these two features, she manages to point out the lack of representation of women in these stories without belabouring the point (Rees-Jones 29). This shows her political awareness which she uses throughout the poetry. Therefore, she is a ground-breaking poet with an original voice (Rees-Jones 4). *The World's*

Wife has been described as a metaphorical autobiography as Duffy mixes her personal experience with myth and history making for an entertaining poetry (Rees-Jones 27).

The Influence of the Women's Narrative in *The World's Wife*

The neglect of women in the historical, mythological and fictional events that are referenced in *The World's Wife* by Carol Ann Duffy is revealed through the ignored narrative of women, which Duffy highlights in the poems' male-centred titles. Duffy also portrays women's ability to express themselves through the female characters she refers to in her poems, giving them a voice and an identity. Unknown historical characters such as Mrs. Freud and Mrs. Darwin come to light through Duffy's conversational poems, where these wives of famous scholars express their different attitudes towards their husbands and their work. Although the women's identity expands through their voices finally being heard, it still partly belongs to their husbands. Their names continue to be Mrs., rather than the ones that they were given at birth. This emphasises their loss of identity, not only through lack of voice but also through the dropping of their given names. Their individual identity is therefore taken and replaced by the husband's ownership as his name is used to label the wife's place in society and the duties she must follow in that position.

Although one might not realize it, most historical, mythological, and fictional stories only depict one side of events. Most of the time it has been from the men's point of view, as they have been the superior gender in the patriarchy that has dominated the world ever since written history began. Simone de Beauvoir discusses the power imbalance between the genders as an unnatural social system which men perpetuate, being that women are regarded as only destined to reproduce and give life (de Beauvoir 64). Men hold their power over women by objectifying them as childbearing machines as it is their only destiny (de Beauvoir 59). This is not an automatic process, but one caused by societal influential factors such as the dominant idea of patriarchy. Thus, men gain more power by disregarding women as their voice and feelings threaten men's domination over them and the society they live in. By dismissing women's characters and opinions, men ignore their stories and reality and exalt

their own. The existence of women's stories and their narrative of events is unquestionable, but the fact is that they were seldom recorded.

A large majority of the titles of the poems in *The World's Wife* refer to a male figure despite the poem being about a woman and her narrative of the story. This leaves the women nameless and thereby without their own individual identity, at least through the eyes of history. By naming the poems in such a way, Duffy highlights the problem of their representation in the stories she references. The title of the book, *The World's Wife*, also indicates the lack of women's portrayal and men's possession of women's identities. Even the world's wife does not possess her individual name aside from her husband. Duffy continues working with this theme in the titles of her poems as they almost all relate to the men in the female characters' lives. One could also say that the existence of these women is only known because of their relations to legendary men. Mrs. Darwin and Mrs. Freud would likely not have been remembered decades later if they had not been married to their husbands. Neither would Mrs. Midas, Mrs. Tiresias, Mrs. Sisyphus, Mrs. Faust, Mrs. Icarus, nor Mrs. Beast. Additionally, the poems' titles indicate the women's status in society, that is, being inferior to men and serving as men's property. Duffy takes artistic license as she writes the inner thoughts of the women in her book; however, there is nothing to refute her interpretation as there is no record of these women as characters in their own right. In Duffy's poems, these women can think, feel and act of their own accord.

By focusing on the women's narrative, Duffy renders the women finally able to express themselves and talk about the feelings they have towards life and their husbands. Duffy gives them individuality and a voice by writing from their perspective and expressing their views. In "Mrs. Beast", Belle's perspective on her relationship with the Beast is rather changed from the commonly associated idea of them as a couple. Instead of looking at Belle, or Mrs. Beast, as the victim who learns to love the Beast who imprisoned her, she herself is the one in control in the relationship. She is a strong, independent woman who dominates Mr Beast and does as she pleases. Despite her control and domination in the relationship, she is still addressed as Mrs. Beast but not by her given name. In her article on Duffy's *The World's Wife*, Rumana Rahman points out the change in the depiction of the men who are referenced in Duffy's poems: "Where the world commonly knows the men as heroes, scholars, and high achievers, they turn out to be obnoxious poets, bad lovers, greedy capitalists, spiteful or

boring husbands, devils, apes, and even pigs to the women related to them” (Rahman 89). In Duffy’s poem “Mrs. Icarus” the speaker shows the disdain she feels for her husband as she is watching him attempt his fatal flight and feeling completely fed up with him. This feeling is shown in the last line of the poem as she states rather colloquially that she married a fool, or as she phrases it, “a total, utter, absolute, Grade A pillock.” Duffy’s choice of words in this poem gives a more humorous tone as the verbal abuse regarding her husband comes across as an entertaining anecdote from a housewife who has stood by watching many of her husband’s foolish acts. As the first line of the poem indicates, she is among many who have made this mistake or have been forced to make it (Duffy, 54). The story of Icarus and his folly is widely known as it is demonstrative of the consequences of impulsive actions. There are descriptions of his father’s grief, but no wife is mentioned, although it is likely that he had one as it was common during the time this mythological story is supposed to have taken place. A man that does such an impulsive and foolish thing as Icarus did, is likely to have acted similarly before. This explains the annoyed reaction of Icarus’s imagined wife as this is most likely not the first instance of stupidity she has watched him enact. The reference to other wives generalises the experience and indicates that this is the reality of many women who unfortunately are stuck in a marriage to men they despise.

The element of a previously non-existent narrative can also be seen in the poem “Eurydice” where the famous love story of Eurydice and Orpheus is dismissed. In Duffy’s poem, Orpheus is revealed to have some undesirable traits such as stalker-like tendencies, or at the very least to have been an extremely tiring boyfriend. In lines 16 to 23 of “Eurydice”, Eurydice talks about their relationship and describes Orpheus’ behaviour as being a bit childlike, needy and egocentric. He follows her and hovers around her against her will and is then described as sulking because he cannot bear to take any criticism, not even from his muse. Their relationship is depicted as being rather one-sided; he puts her on a pedestal as his muse without letting her have a say in the matter. This behaviour is also evident in “Pygmalion’s Bride”, but here the objectification of the wife is greater as she is an actual sculpture. The discomfort that Eurydice feels towards the relationship is epitomised in the fact that she feels safe and content in hell, a place which is associated with pain and suffering (Duffy 58). Eurydice’s relationship with Orpheus is an example of a male centred love story with an unreliable narrator. By reading the story solely through the eyes of Orpheus, the

reader is manipulated into rooting for Orpheus in his quest for retrieving his lover. This has been a common theme with male writers, although it has improved greatly in recent decades, where the sole focus is on the needs and desires of the main male character and his female love interest is a one-dimensional character. These stories centre around “getting the girl”, which is simply an objectification of women as they are trophies or muses, as in Orpheus’s case.

In the poem “Mrs Sisyphus”, the wife expresses a side of her husband we have not considered before. The story about Sisyphus and his punishment by the gods is paralleled to an unfruitful and pointless career. This can be seen from the modern setting of the poem and represents the increasing industrialisation of the job market as well as the growing influence of capitalistic forces on societies. Workers are essentially just cogs in the machine and are blind to this fact, but this does not mean that their wives are blind to this reality. The first line of the poem “Mrs. Sisyphus” shows Mrs. Sisyphus’ annoyance at her husband’s ignorance as she introduces her husband to the reader by stating “That’s him pushing the stone up the hill, the jerk”. While Sisyphus tries to justify the negative aspects of his job to his wife by trying to sell the positive aspects of it such as the “perks”, Mrs. Sisyphus points out to him the lack of free time it leaves him with. Duffy succeeds in making the old myth, about the man who had to push a stone up a hill continuously his whole life, a relatable anecdote from an irritated housewife. Because of his time-consuming work, Mrs. Sisyphus is left alone as other famous wives have been, such as Frau Bach and Noah’s wife. Their words do not matter and all they can do is watch their husbands work hard (Duffy 21). Because of the increasing industrialisation and how it decreased the value of the individual’s work in the employment market, many couples may have experienced similar arguments about the importance of the man’s work. This can be linked to the idea of the American dream which drives its believers to work endlessly to reap the benefits of their work and live their ideal life. However, these dreams are often unachievable as there are so many forces working against it alongside a myriad of other people with the same dream. This also applies to wives of workaholic men who prioritise their work over their partners.

Not only can the reader finally perceive the women’s narrative, but a postmodern view of history can demonstrate this power imbalance as history is always written by the winners: the men. Duffy, a woman, gives these characters and historical women the power

to write their own stories without the influence of men. This can feel a bit aggressive at times, but it is necessary as women in literature have long been a marginalised group who have struggled to express. Duffy chooses characters, fictional, mythological or historical from different periods in time before the women's rights movement, when women did not have the chance to speak their mind and gives them much needed attention and a platform to express themselves. By using casual colloquial language, sometimes even a bit crass, the women in *The World's Wife* are able to express their feelings in a way that comes across as talk between friends. This is most evident in Duffy's addressing the readers in "Frau Freud" and "Eurydice" where she calls them "Ladies" and "Girls" in order to emphasise the normality of the stories as if they were merely chatting during a coffee break (Duffy 55, 58).

Although the comical and demeaning remarks the women in Duffy's poems make about their husbands can touch a nerve, the image of these men becomes more rounded throughout these descriptions and expressions. These men were not perfect, although history often represents them as such. There were a lot of things going on behind the scenes and it is important to keep that in mind while reading their stories. Domestic disputes can sometimes reveal the true nature of people, even famous figures. For instance, Mrs. Quasimodo may have experienced her husband and his love of his belltower differently than the reader did. There is only one narrative available of his story and that is the one from his perspective which features him in a more positive manner than his wife's narration of him would do. Correspondingly, William Shakespeare's wife Anne Hathaway is one of the few people that knew the man himself but not only his works as his life is mostly unknown.

In "Anne Hathaway", the reader may assume that the premise of the poem, as in some of the other poems, reflects negatively upon the husband, William Shakespeare, as he only gave his wife Anne their second-best bed upon his death. However, Duffy uses this opportunity to show the love they shared, as this was the bed they slept in together. This also shows how things are often differently perceived from the outside perspective and that we cannot know the whole story. Duffy bases this entire poem on one line in Shakespeare's will where he leaves his second-best bed to Anne. Anne Hathaway paints a picture of their relationship by using a myriad of metaphors likening their bed to a "spinning world" of wonders. She pays tribute to her husband's talent as she likens their romantic relationship to the elements of his writing. His use of assonances, rhyme and drama become a metaphor for

their lovemaking which took place in the bed they shared. The length of the poem is also a tribute to William Shakespeare as it is fourteen lines long like his sonnets, although the correct rhyme scheme is missing. Duffy also shows Shakespeare's love for Anne through the medium he is most known for, his poetry or rather the elements in his poetry. She describes Shakespeare's words as "shooting stars which fell on earth", and then transformed into "kisses / On these lips". The depiction of Anne's love for her husband is combined with Shakespeare-like imagery in order to portray their feelings towards each other more vividly. Then a more descriptive metaphor follows as qualities from Shakespeare's poetry are likened to their lovemaking and Anne describes her body as "a softer rhyme" as it responds to his "echo, assonance," and "his touch". Duffy uses this couple and the poetic language which Shakespeare is known for as a method to portray the feeling of intense love between two people (Duffy 30).

The women's reaction to men's actions is made to be a focus point in Duffy's poems, and this shifts the power dynamic between the genders and empowers the women. The poems are less concerned with the men's achievements as the focus is more on how the women around them feel about their partners' behaviour. What separates Duffy's poems from other authors and poets who have written about or discussed these men is that she turns her attention to the women in these stories, or rather the lack of them. Where there is no mentioning of women or wives, she creates a narrative which gives a new perspective on the men's story and legend. These wives are the ones who share the most intimate moments with their husbands, whether they are pleasant or not. For instance, "Anne Hathaway" portrays the intimacy between Anne and her husband William Shakespeare as she recollects their intense love in their second-best bed. By seeing the world through women's eyes, their opinions matter more than before as the woman sometimes makes it look like the man is in charge while she is controlling everything behind the scenes. However, this behind-the-scenes action is what we see and uncovers who has the real power. The focus on the female narrative redresses the previous imbalance between the genders created by patriarchy as the reader only experiences the world, or in this case these stories, through the eyes of women.

The poem "Mrs. Darwin" displays a comical side to the relationship between Darwin and his wife. Mrs. Darwin's funny little remark about the similarity between her husband and an ape they come across in a zoo depicts the affectionate bantering they might share which

indicates their comfort and love for each other. The remark Mrs. Darwin makes about her husband is also interesting because of the date of the event. Duffy makes this event happen before his greatest discovery and therefore playfully suggests that his wife's snide comment is the origin of his masterpiece.

7 April 1852

Went to the Zoo.

I said to Him—

Something about that Chimpanzee over there reminds me of you. (Duffy 20)

Another example of the wife being secretly in control is Belle and Beast's relationship in "Mrs. Beast". The fairy tale which centres around the controlling and rude Beast and the gentle and kind Belle is flipped to reveal that Belle rules their relationship. Unlike "Mrs. Darwin", Belle's relationship with Beast is not described in a tender and entertaining way but instead it portrays an abusive and aggressive union. In this retelling, the Beast is portrayed as more of an animal than a man as he "grunts" and "yelps" as compared to Belle who is described to be more sophisticated and experienced. Her treatment of him also suggests that he is a mere animal since she likens him to a "dog", "dinosaur" and a "dragon" among other things (Duffy 73). Her domination over him begins immediately after her arrival as he "fell to his knees at the door" when she arrived and "kissed her glove". Belle's advice to the reader is to avoid the outwardly perfect guys, such as princes or "a pretty boy" and instead find oneself "a beast" to whom one is superior and who is therefore unlikely to leave (Duffy 72).

Criticism of Patriarchy

In Duffy's *The World's Wife*, the rebellion against patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity is depicted through women's feelings of disdain for the male partners. Alongside this there follows a more humanised version of men as their story gets a more rounded tone. There is a certain pressure to continue the standard of socially determined masculinity, which has also been identified as "toxic masculinity," and which prevents men from showing their more vulnerable feelings and behaviour. Men who are in important positions or choose to write

about men that have some notoriety have a certain societal pressure to keep the image of men in line with stereotypical ideas of what men should be like. This often prevents them from showing positive emotions, as signs of rage, anger and pride seems to be more manly and worthy. This ideology ties in with the ideas of hegemonic masculinity where men are justifiably dominant over other genders and where their needs are meant to be prioritised. De Beauvoir said that “Men have presumed to create a feminine domain ... in order to lock up women therein” (de Beauvoir 65). She talks about how men have taken it upon themselves to create the premise of women’s lives. Under these premises, men serve as prosecution, judge and prison guard to the lives and existence of women. However, the world is not like that. This is a generalization of one gender which documenters, writers and historians have through the ages maintained as it is a fundamental idea in patriarchal societies.

Not all women think or act the same, but the majority of the women in Duffy’s *The World’s Wife* share similar feelings towards their male partners. This feeling is often negative as they are fed up with their husbands and their husbands’ lack of consideration for the women and their feelings. Some of these couples are not even mutually in love as only the man has decided this courtship, an element that is most evident in the poems “Pygmalion’s Bride” and “Eurydice”. In “Pygmalion’s Bride” the bride expresses her discomfort when Pygmalion kisses her “stone-cool lips” as she “lay still” as if she has died because of his action. Her emotional pain is caused by his affections towards her, which makes her feel as if she is dead inside. Pygmalion is blind to her suffering as her submissive behaviour suits his interest and helps continue his ownership of her (Duffy 51-52). In “Eurydice”, Orpheus falls in love with Eurydice and calls her his muse as he is a poet and a musician in Greek mythology. She has no say in the matter and is forced to tolerate her stalker who even follows her to the underworld to retrieve her after her death (Duffy 58-62). This theme of displeasure with their male partner highlights the lack of female representation in the original versions of these stories and gives a more rounded portrayal of the relationships than before. There is also the theme of disdain and feeling of ridicule for the male partner as the wives know them more closely than readers of history, mythology and fiction do.

The men in this book are not perfect, and indeed, no men are. However, these men have been remembered throughout history and have been either feared or praised. They have been idolized as these great remarkable figures and through hegemonic masculinity, their

stories have stopped short of displaying their human faults, their daily demeanour and their behaviour towards the people who were closest to them. The sole focus on female narrative in *The World's Wife* only highlights the feelings and opinions women may have shared and not been able to express in a lasting manner for the modern-day reader to access it.

The poem “*from Mrs. Tiresias*” centres around the myth of Tiresias who was transformed into a woman against his will as a punishment by the Greek gods. Duffy plays with the idea of the man changing into a woman and how his wife would experience this occurrence. Tiresias would not be considered transgender according to today’s definitions as he is essentially a man trapped inside a woman’s body and must adjust to this. In a woman’s body he still represents the ideology and tendencies of hegemonic masculinity as his gender is still male although his sex is not. During the first lines of the poem, Tiresias is introduced as a self-centred man who dismisses his wife’s qualities and thinks highly of himself. However, the manly image that he presents while he is a man breaks down as he is transformed into a woman. When he starts menstruating, he is still unable to break from his former self-centred tendencies of only thinking of himself and neglecting the experience and feelings of others around him. He acts as if he is the first person in history who has endured the negative aspects of menstruation. He refuses to be seen kissing his wife in public as the idea of society thinking of his wife as a lesbian is far too demeaning. Despite having experienced living in a woman’s body for some time, he continues his know-it-all attitude as he announces his knowledge regarding women’s experience although he has only been a woman for a short period of time (Duffy 14-17). Antony Rowland argues that Tiresias’ behaviour after his transformation is a parody of the idea of womanhood. He copies what he thinks women act like, which only creates this offensive caricature of a woman (Rowland 213). As Rees-Jones points out, Duffy reimagines heterocentric portraits of identity by examining the similarity and dissimilarity of the lovers as well as the drawbacks that language has in communicating these ideas (Rees-Jones 30). This ties into the conflict Tiresias feels in his new body, as he struggles with his relationship with his wife and the societal pressures of heteronormal behaviour. It also highlights the difference between Tiresias and his wife, especially the way they act according to their ideas of gender.

In “Mrs. Faust” the societal pressure of conforming to a hegemonic masculine ideal is depicted in the exaggerated process of Faust continuously growing more evil and more

vindictive. In the beginning of his success, the couple start to live more luxuriously where his wife enjoys the lifestyle because of its benefits. However, his focus is on the “kudos” or praises he receives, which indicates the approval he needs from society. Then he begins to cheat on his wife with “whores,” displaying his total lack of concern for his wife and disrespecting women by considering them as objects of pleasure that he can use as he pleases because of his gender and the power he possesses (Duffy, lines 19-27). His lack of respect for women and his objectification of them is in line with hegemonic masculine ideology as certainty that the women are there to serve him. However, his greed is not limited to women but also to material possessions as well as increased power, emphasised in his comment about the world “spreading its legs”, indicating the exploitative nature of Faust and showing the deep disregard he has towards others, especially the women around him (Duffy, line 46-52).

In “Pygmalion’s Bride”, the depiction of Pygmalion’s actions shows him to be brutally victimising his wife. His predatory behaviour is based on toxic societal ideas of masculinity where he thinks it is acceptable to act without her consent. In the original story the Bride is merely a statue, but Duffy succeeds in creating an identity for her in a poem about the Bride’s inner thoughts and feelings. This also centres around the fact that silence is not a form of consent. In the first stanza of the poem, the speaker thinks to herself: “He will not touch me,” as if to guard herself from him. However, the next line reveals that despite her objection, he does touch her. The toxic ideas of masculinity are portrayed through men’s lack of concern for the women around them, as is shown in “Mrs. Faust”. What is different in “Pygmalion’s Bride” is the victimhood of the bride, as it seems that she is unable to speak. Here it is implied that Pygmalion is sexually abusing the bride as her inner monologue describes him kissing her, while her reaction is simply to distance herself from the pain she is experiencing as she thinks: “I lay still / as though I’d died.” Duffy’s retelling of this story from Greek mythology shares some qualities with the other poems, such as the non-literal understanding of the mythological story. The bride is not literally a sculpture but rather a woman who is sexually abused by a man she feels she cannot prevent from doing so. There are also signs of some mental abuse as she describes his words as “terrible” when he tells her “blunt endearments”. As mentioned earlier, Pygmalion is blind to her reaction to his affection towards her. Her submission allows him to objectify her in order to dominate her. The reality of his intentions is supported by his later reaction to Mrs. Pygmalion’s pretended passion

towards him. She simply fakes it, as indicated when she says, “all an act”. As she stops being passive as a statue, he loses interest in her because he does not have the sole power anymore in their relationship. Her freedom from the relationship comes from breaking away from the sculpture she served as, which can also be perceived as destroying Pygmalion’s projection of a lover he can control (Duffy, 51-52). This is a pattern in some relationships where one person, often the man, controls the relationship through unwanted displays of affection for the other partner.

“Frau Freud” focuses on men’s fascination with their own genitals and equating virility with mental health. Frau Freud, or Mrs. Freud was the wife of Sigmund Freud, the famous psychologist, who based most of his theories on sex and its connection to the human psyche. One of his theories was the idea of penis envy, to explain women’s anxiety and negative behaviours as they were envious of men’s genitals. Mrs. Freud dismisses this idea, as Duffy ends the poem with Mrs. Freud pitying men for their genitals, implying that the women’s genitals are superior. Additionally, she makes fun of her husband’s ideas of masculinity as she lists the different names for male genitalia. In this poem, Duffy highlights the presence of male genitalia in current society as well as its importance in Freud’s theories. Mrs. Freud’s abundance of nicknames for male genitalia shows an influential factor in patriarchal society where men can focus too much on themselves without thinking about those around them. However, in this poem it can be interpreted as a metaphor for men in general and Mrs. Freud’s annoyance with them.

By criticising the standard of excellence men are meant to follow, Duffy creates more rounded characters by giving their female partners a voice in order to show a different and unknown perspective to their lives and characters. The poem “Anne Hathaway” is a prime example of this, as the reader is able to see the tender love between Anne and William Shakespeare despite the misleading reference to William Shakespeare’s will, giving as it does an impression of disregard for his wife. “Queen Kong” is also a good example of this, as the gender roles are switched, and the man is presented in a more vulnerable position, something that more commonly applies to women. Queen Kong calls her husband “my little man”, which undermines the stereotypical gender norm in a patriarchal society. She also has the power in the relationship as she finds him, “scoops him up” and falls in love with him. She later “lets him go” so he can get back home and then returns to him out of love. Here, Duffy

plays with stereotypical gender roles and achieves a certain role reversal in her portrayal of the male character. The love story between Queen Kong and her little man does not seem unrealistic if one does not focus on difference in size (Duffy 31-33).

In “Delilah”, Samson, Delilah’s lover, is also depicted as a vulnerable man who seeks his lover’s wisdom and help to become a better person. He is conflicted with having to be strong and masculine, in the way toxic ideas of masculinity in a patriarchal society encourage men to be, and wants to be more “gentle, or loving, or tender”. However, this is seen through the eyes of Delilah, who is an unreliable narrator as she tells the reader: “And, yes, I was sure / that he wanted to change, / my warrior” (Duffy 28-29). This indicates Delilah’s projection of his feelings rather than his actual desires and causes her to cut his famous long hair in order to help him. However, while doing so she shows her selfish side since she is in fact securing him for herself, as his power that made him a hero came from his hair and therefore diminished after the hair was cut. This poem explores the issue of patriarchy’s binary ideas of gender roles, where one can only be one or the other. Samson loses his physical manly aspects in order to gain more conventional feminine features, such as being “gentle”. By making the decision for him, Delilah flips the conventional power dynamic and takes matters into her own hands.

Conclusion

Despite the numerous obstacles women have faced throughout history, they have still managed to survive and even thrive though sometimes only with the help of men. Men have historically dominated women’s narratives both in the recording of historical events and the creation of fiction as well as through religion and mythology. By doing so they have kept the power over women while they have robbed them of their identity. In *The World’s Wife* Carol Ann Duffy achieves her goal of bringing back the stories of women, in an entertaining and forthright manner. She also demonstrates the duality of well-known tales as she highlights the underdog’s side, which in this case is the side of the women. Not only is Duffy triumphant in creating a previously non-existent women’s narrative but she manages to portray the women’s potential feelings and opinions in a rather humorous and realistic manner. She is

also able to bring these stories closer to the modern reader as she uses simple but effective language to bring the feelings of the narrators to light. Duffy succeeds in both pointing out the injustice women have faced through history and connecting the situations these women faced to current struggles in society by addressing some of issues she herself has experienced. The struggle for improved women's rights is far from over and it is therefore important to be aware of what has been achieved and what yet remains to be done. One of the ways to monitor these advances is through literature, whether it is through poetry, fiction or non-fiction. Feminist literature has advanced and developed greatly since its beginnings and it has been critical for influencing people's ideas regarding the feminist cause. It has influenced a wave of female writers to take part and prosper in a previously men-dominated field. New writers that belong to the fourth wave of feminism tend to reflect on and question societal conformity and the values that are dominant today and are therefore a good addition to the feminist literary dialogue. There have also been some improvements in the depiction of women as they are finally portrayed as individual beings rather than as a simple extension of men. Carol Ann Duffy's reflective poems also present a humorous perspective on largely male-dominated historical, mythological and fictional stories. These stories and the characters within them are well-known and therefore it is amusing for readers to see a new and original perspective on them. Women make up a large percentage of humanity and therefore it is important for them to have the right to speak, to write and to make their voice heard.

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