

“It happened like this – I did everything in my power to make him look back”:
Gender and Relationships in Carol Ann Duffy’s *The World’s Wife*



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Abstract

This essay explores the importance of gender with regard to the relationships depicted in Carol Ann Duffy's collection of poems *The World's Wife*, arguing that factors such as individual traits and social circumstances are of greater weight than any gender incompatibilities. Firstly, the characteristics with which Duffy endows female and male characters are discussed, pointing out that the relationships described fail for other reasons than mere gender discord. Secondly, reasons offered for failures in heterosexual relationships are explored further, focusing on the poems "Little Red-Cap" and "Pygmalion's Bride", after which follows a discussion pertaining to the transgression of gender norms in "Mrs Beast" and "Delilah", along with a section questioning the existence of gender-specific traits. The chapter ends in an analysis of the potentially successful heterosexual relationship depicted in "Anne Hathaway", and the last chapter deals with the relationship between two women in "Mrs Tiresias", as compared to the speaker's previous heterosexual marriage. Whereas non-gender-specific individual traits such as greed and selfishness, along with historical gender discrimination and other social circumstances, account for the majority of the failing relationships depicted in the collection, communication emerges as the main determining factor in successful and prosperous relationships, whether heterosexual or between two women.

Front page: Raoux, Jean. *Orpheus and Eurydice*. c. 1718-1720. Oil on canvas. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

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Introduction

The World's Wife is a collection of poems, written by the Scottish poet and playwright Carol Ann Duffy and published in 1999. Duffy often deals with issues such as gender, oppression and violence and has been awarded numerous awards for her poetry, notably the Whitbread Poetry Award for *Mean Time* (1993) and the T.S. Eliot Prize for *Rapture* (2005), and in May 2009 she was appointed Britain's Poet Laureate; this makes her the first woman, the first Scot and the first openly gay person to hold the position. In *The World's Wife*, she makes use of the dramatic monologue to narrate historical and mythical events from a female perspective, and the reader is introduced to an array of historical, mythical, fictional and real characters. By narrating from a female perspective Duffy contrives to give women of the past a voice, thus reinserting them and their lost stories into history, an arena that has traditionally been reserved for men, causing women to be marginalised.

In an interview in *Options* Duffy is quoted as having said that "any poet is writing about their experience of being alive", commenting that "gender informs that experience, but that is all"¹. It has been argued that this statement "loses its validity" (Wójcik-Leese 18) in regard to *The World's Wife*, which has often been deemed a collection dealing solely with gender incompatibility. Some critics have even described the poems as stories of "women turning the tables on their famous menfolk", suggesting that Duffy ultimately confirms "their status as wives" and thus denies them the possibility of being "people in their own right" (Dent). The aim of this essay is to argue that the collection, although dealing with feminism and gender discrimination, is not merely concerned with gender, but with relationships and possible explanations as to why they fail. In doing so, the ways in which male and female characters are portrayed throughout the collection will be discussed, examining to what extent the

¹ Interview in *Options*, 1990.

characters may be said to be limited by gender. The nature of failures in heterosexual relationships, the category into which most of the relationships described in the collection fall, will be explored in the two poems “Little Red-Cap” and “Pygmalion’s Bride”, the transgression of gender norms will be looked into focusing on “Mrs Beast” and “Delilah”, and the possibly successful relationship depicted in “Anne Hathaway” will be analysed. Finally, relationships between women will be discussed, taking “*from Mrs Tiresias*” into account.

Chapter 1: Gender characteristics

As the title of the collection suggests, *The World's Wife* brings into light women who have been kept in the background while their male contemporaries have, by and large, monopolised the limelight. Due to the warped writing of history, where “the knowing subject – along with the historically important objects the mirror [of history] serves up for scrutiny – is usually male” (Smith 2), women have been rendered passive secondary characters, merely there to lend their support to their husbands and admire their achievements. In this chapter, the ways in which women and men are depicted will be looked into, showing that the women of the past are not necessarily passive and docile, whereas the men depicted have potential to be something more than physically capable achievers. The characters described are thereby not limited by what could be viewed as traditional gender traits, and the aim of this chapter is to show that Duffy in her poems portrays an array of individual characters, not male and female characters as two homogenous and separate groups. The relationships described are thus not so much affected by possible gender differences, if there indeed are any, as by individual traits and social circumstances. Admittedly, these social circumstances are often founded on gender discrimination, but it is these injustices rather than gender itself that influence the characters and their actions.

As a result of the narrative consistently being from a female point of view, male characters, along with some female minor characters, tend to be described, whereas the main female characters are mostly depicted through their attitudes to the people, particularly the men, around them.

1.1. Depiction of women

A recurrent theme among the women portrayed in Duffy's collection, is that they are waiting along the sidelines while their husbands, in one way or another, are making history. As myth and history would have it both "Penelope" and "Mrs Lazarus" can be viewed as examples of this, but Duffy's take on the events paints quite a different image. Penelope might start off as an abandoned woman, "hoping to see [Odysseus] saunter home"² (70: 2), but she eventually moves on and in occupying herself with embroidery, "thinking to amuse [herself]" (70: 10), she creates and identifies with a woman at the centre of her work; "self-contained, absorbed, content, / most certainly not waiting" (71: 50-51). She relives her fate through her stitches, from embracing "heroism's boy" (70: 23) to "[watching] him sail away" (70: 26), and when Odysseus returns from his illustrious Odyssey she has already made a journey of her own, although of an inward variety, remaining largely physically passive, and feels that it is "far-too-late" (71: 52) for them to resume their relationship. Similarly, Mrs Lazarus commences by mourning her husband's departure, relating that she initially "howled, shrieked, clawed / at the burial stones till [her] hands bled" (49: 4-5), but the dead man eventually becomes "memory" (49: 25), "legend, language" (49: 21) and she moves on, making a "cuckold" (50: 40) out of the resurrected Lazarus. Duffy is thus effectively portraying the two women as people in their own rights, rather than mere embodiments of marital faithfulness, whereas the men are not depicted as being completely trapped in stereotypical gender roles either. Odysseus is pictured as a mere "boy" (70: 23), appearing vulnerable, and when Lazarus, "horror on his face" (50: 36), returns in an even more vulnerable state after having been brought back from the grave, without asking for it, he finds that things have changed, leaving him "disinherited, out of his time" (50: 40). The two couples in these poems do seem happy to begin with, and Duffy herself has described Mrs Lazarus as being "terribly in love" (Duffy,

² Carol Ann Duffy, *The World's Wife*. Chatham: Picador, 2010. Page numbers and lines from poems will be given from this edition at every instance where Duffy's poems are quoted.

Sheer Poetry interview), and it is thus time and circumstances rather than possible gender differences that eventually make them incompatible.

In poems such as “Mrs Sisyphus” and “Mrs Icarus”, Duffy likewise draws on the image of waiting women who remain immobile while their husbands, although in physical proximity, are busy making names for themselves. While Mrs Sisyphus lies “alone in the dark” (22: 25), comparing her own sentiments to those of the wives of Noah and Bach, her husband’s struggle causes “folk [to] flock from miles around just to gawk” (21: 11), finding his endless work “a quirk, / a bit of a lark” (21: 12-13). Instead of admiring and extolling him for performing his unavailing task, she refers to it as “a load of old bollocks” (21: 14), and calls the glory of his work into question by pointing out that he goes on simply because of the self-imposed notion that he “mustn’t shirk” (21: 21, 24). The protagonist in “Mrs Faust” takes a similarly cynical stand regarding her husband’s aspirations for fame, stating that the man who sold his soul to the devil “didn’t have a soul to sell” (27: 135). Again, the resentment in these relationships does not seem to be founded in gender or mere criticism of the male sex, but rather acts as a warning about what spending too much time working can do to a relationship. In speaking about “Mrs Sisyphus” Duffy herself has stated that the workaholics described in these poems “could be women, because it could apply to women as well” (Duffy, *Sheer Poetry* interview). Meanwhile, however much Mrs Faust criticises her husband, she does not come across as a very pleasant character herself. The narrator describes herself as materialistic, just “as bad” (23: 18) as her husband, spends her money on plastic surgery (25: 77-79), travels to Third World countries to return “enlightened” (25: 81) rather than to help, and even “[buys] a kidney” (27: 131). With the husband largely absent and the wife not feeling any jealousy (23: 24-25) about him visiting prostitutes, the relationship described does not seem to fail due to work addiction, or gender issues, for that matter. Rather, the Fausts’ marriage appears to be loveless to begin with.

1.2. Depiction of men

As mentioned above, the male characters of the collection are typically portrayed as achievers, seeking to gain power and admiration in order to become what would often be thought of as successful individuals. A typical example of this can be found in Faust, who sells his soul in order to get ahead in life and become materially successful and who is described by words such as “clever, greedy, slightly mad” (23: 17), “cunning” and “callous” (27: 134). Greed can also be seen in other characters, such as Midas who wishes for everything he touches to be turned into gold, making life unbearable for himself as well as his wife. More than greed, what gets to the narrator, Mrs Midas, is the “pure selfishness” (13: 62) which his reckless wish exemplifies, and what really appears to have ended their relationship is the selfishness itself, a trait which is neither typically masculine nor feminine. The detrimental effects of selfishness on relationships is furthermore far from unheard of, and “a general rise of selfishness – gender unspecified” has often taken the blame for “excessive divorce rates” (Stacey 460).

The relationship between Mrs and Mr Midas is not the only one destroyed by lack of empathy, and Orpheus, one of the two main characters in “Eurydice”, is another example of a male character endowed with the far from endearing trait. The character cannot fathom that Eurydice does not want to return to her life with him, preferring to stay in Hades, the “place where language stopped” (58: 4), rather than having him “[sulk] for a night and a day / because she [remarks] on his weakness for abstract nouns” (58: 23-24). The fact that her only way of getting him to turn around while ascending from Hades, thus releasing her, is to flatter his ego by asking to hear his “*masterpiece*” (61: 103) of a poem, clearly indicates a certain pompousness, whereas his lack of response when she implores him to see that they are through, “[touching] him once / on the back of his neck” (61: 89-90) and earnestly entreating

him to “*let [her] stay*” (61: 91), denotes callousness. As mentioned above, however, these traits are in no way limited to the male characters in the collection, as characters such as Mrs Faust, who according to Duffy “might even be worse” (Duffy, *Sheer Poetry* interview) than her husband, exemplify. Moreover, the frustration of Duffy’s Eurydice does not seem to be directed merely at Orpheus, but at a society where “the Gods are like publishers, / usually male” (59: 51-52) and women are shut in by epithets such as “Dearest, Beloved, Dark Lady, White Goddess” (59: 49) and “His Muse” (58: 22). What is criticised in this poem is thereby not any alleged gender specific traits, but the way that society is constructed and the consequences it brings about on an individual level. The relationship described is not plagued so much by personal characteristics as by the discord between two people where one is allowed to express himself through poetry and the other feels deprived of the opportunity to “speak for [herself]” (59: 48). Consequently, Duffy does not in *The World’s Wife* try to explain “the strange historical fact” of men’s power over women “by reference to men’s individual shortcomings” (Dent), as one critic has argued, but rather demonstrates how social circumstances can affect individuals in their dealings with each other.

All of the characteristics described above could be viewed as signs of power, but they all seem to work in a restrictive way on the male characters. Faust is “dragged [...] / straight down to hell” (27: 116-117), Midas left “thin, / delirious” (13: 58-59) and alone, and Orpheus is obliged to return to the living alone, only walking “by the edge of a vast lake / near the wise, drowned silence of the dead” (62: 70-71). Duffy does hint, however, that they need not necessarily be restricted by the traits described above. An example of this is Samson, the embodiment of physical strength who can “rip out the roar / from the throat of a tiger” (28: 7-8) and “flay the bellowing fur / from a bear” (28: 11-12), but who experiences a lack of emotional capability and expresses a clear wish to change. The significance of this poem and

the desire to go against stereotypical gender norms, and its significance in the area of heterosexual relationships, will be further discussed below.

Chapter 2: Failure in heterosexual relationships and the transgression of gender norms

As mentioned in the introduction, the vast majority of the poems in *The World's Wife* deal with relationships that are more or less failing. Most of them describe heterosexual relationships and the reasons offered by Duffy as to why they are unsuccessful will be discussed in this chapter, with the main focus on “Little Red-Cap” and “Pygmalion’s Bride”. In the discussion about the transgression of gender norms there will be a focus on “Mrs Beast” and “Delilah”, after which the questioning of gender specific traits and the possibly successful relationship depicted in “Anne Hathaway” will be discussed.

2.1. Failure in heterosexual relationships

In this section, two poems depicting unsuccessful heterosexual relationships will be analysed, and the main factors which influence the characters and their actions will be looked into in order to explain the eventual endings of the relationships.

2.1.1. “Little Red-Cap”

In “Little Red-Cap”, the opening poem of the collection, Duffy uses the Brothers Grimm’s version of the fairy tale as a starting point. The poem describes a meeting between Little Red-Cap, a young girl who acts as narrator, and a wolf, here, an older man with whom the narrator initiates a relationship. At the outset of the poem, the protagonist describes a place referred to as “childhood’s end” (3: 1), and it is as she leaves this place and reaches the edge of the woods that she first gets in contact with the wolf. She thus, in a sense, leaves childhood and innocence behind in order to let the wolf lead her “deep into the woods, / away from home” (3: 14-15), which could indicate that she is entering the relationship in a disadvantageous position. The narrator also describes herself as a “sweet sixteen” and a “waif” (3: 12),

seemingly observing herself through the big eyes of the wolf. Viewing the young girl as the weak party, however, might be more suitable for the original fairy tale than for Duffy's poem, as it is in fact the girl who "[claps] eyes on the wolf" (3: 6) and not vice versa, and who then "[makes] quite sure that he [spots her]" (3: 11). This dynamic is quite unexpected in respect of conventionally established gender roles, where the young girl should be passive, innocent and compliant. Instead of being a victim, the narrator quite willingly makes her way to the "dark tangled thorny place" (3: 15) that is the wolf's lair, and whatever innocence she did possess seems tarnished as her stockings are "ripped to shreds" (3: 17) and she "clings till dawn to [the wolf's] thrashing fur" (3: 21).

The fact remains, however, that the wolf is at some sort of advantage in the relationship, as the young girl claims to take "lesson[s]" (3: 19) from him. He is the experienced poet, "reading his verse out loud" (3: 7), and the narrator seems more passionate about what she could learn from him than about the wolf himself, describing the wall of books in his lair as "crimson, gold" and "aglow" (4: 28). "Poetry" (3: 13) is quite simply stated as the reason behind her interest in him, and it is in the description of words that the narrative reaches its peak of intensity: "Words, words were truly alive on the tongue, in the head, / warm, beating, frantic, winged; music and blood" (4: 29-30). The passionate narrator goes on to state that "it took ten years" (4: 31) to realise that "a greying wolf / howls the same old song at the moon, year in, year out, / season after season, same rhyme, same reason" (4: 34-36), but this realisation seems to indicate that the former student has overtaken her teacher. Whereas she can see the beauty of birds, "the uttered thoughts of trees" (4: 34), and goes "in search of a living bird" (3: 24), he engulfs the symbolically white dove which she finds, referring to it as "breakfast in bed" (4: 26). This illustrates his inability to see or appreciate beauty, suggesting that he lacks the aesthetic capabilities possessed by the girl. The narrator ultimately shows herself to be at an advantage as she, in Duffy's own words, "more or less consumes him"

(Duffy, *Sheer Poetry* interview), and finishes off by “[taking] an axe to the wolf” (4: 38). The fact that the girl finds the “glistening, virgin white” (4: 40) bones of her grandmother in his abdomen further signifies that things have ended quite differently in the past, the wolf coming out on top.

Here, one can observe parallels between “Little Red-Cap” and the previously discussed “Eurydice”, as both poems deal with the oppression of female poets in the past. The wolf and Orpheus both declaim their poetry with confidence, perhaps too much of it, while both women strive to obtain the same possibility and to some extent succeed in doing so; Little Red-Cap surpasses her former teacher and addresses the oppression of the past, while Eurydice manages to get free of Orpheus and use her own voice, the last stanza, reflecting that “the dead are so talented” (62: 69), arguably being her initiating attempt at poetry of her own. Keeping these circumstances in mind, history and gender indeed seem to inform the experience of the characters, but they are nonetheless described in their own rights and not as mere gender stereotypes.

Considering the nature of the fairy tale from which the poem takes its inspiration, the relationship between Little Red-Cap and the wolf seems to have been doomed from the very outset. Someone would inevitably end up being consumed, and the fact that Little Red-Cap consumes the wolf rather than the other way around simply goes to show that gender does not necessarily dictate the outcome of a relationship. Meanwhile, the actions which lead to the definite end of the relationship are not mere whims, but results of social circumstances. With regards to these circumstances, the poem could indeed be described as supplying a feminist perspective on a relationship, but it is important to keep in mind that it criticises the social conditions that separate the genders and the options available to them rather than any gender-specific traits.

2.1.2. “Pygmalion’s Bride”

Much like the relationship depicted in “Little Red-Cap”, that in “Pygmalion’s Bride” seems to be entered by two people who are not on the same level. This poem takes its inspiration from an ancient myth, famously retold by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* over 2000 years ago, featuring Pygmalion, a mythological Greek sculptor who carves a woman out of ivory and falls in love with his creation. The statue, named Galatea, is brought to life by Venus, in accordance with Pygmalion’s wish. In Duffy’s version, the altered storyline is told in Galatea’s voice, and the scenario is looked upon from quite a different perspective.

Pygmalion’s goal in sculpting Galatea appears to be to create an ideal woman, and in his earnest wish for her to come to life there seems to be a complete lack of consideration for her potential identity. She might not want to be a silent adornment, all beauty and ivory innocence, far removed from the “lascivious life”³ (Ovid 287: 1) that Pygmalion considers other women to lead. Claire McEwen argues that Duffy’s poetry often “challenges the masculinist representations of female identity that pervade history and literary discourse, and women’s lived experience [...] in order to reject the rendering of woman as an aesthetic construction” (McEwen 7), and this statement corresponds well to that which the narrator in “Pygmalion’s Bride” is striving to accomplish. When Pygmalion brings Duffy’s Galatea “*girly things*” (Duffy 51: 22) and speaks “blunt endearments” (51: 10), she persistently “[drowns] him out” (51: 15) and “[plays] statue, shtum” (51: 25), desperately signalling that she does not want to be the woman that he is persistently trying to shape into form. In giving Galatea something more than mere life, namely a will of her own, Duffy empowers her to reject the identity that has been constructed for her, and the author can be said to “[reject] the literary tradition of Pygmalion, as portrayed by Ovid and George Bernard Shaw [...], and

³ Publius Ovidius Naso, *Ovid: Metamorphoses*. Forgotten Books, 2007. Page number and lines from the poem will be given from this edition at every instance where Ovid’s poem is quoted.

[mock] their assumptions about female identity” (McEwen 5). Like Eurydice, Galatea has no interest in being a muse, inciting her to fight for her right to an identity of her own.

The poem also brings into light the problematic aspects of beauty, male as well female notions of it, and the consequences that a society that is all too focused on physical appearance can bring about. Pygmalion, who “abhor’d all woman kind, but most a wife” (Ovid 287: 2), seeks not only to create a compliant spouse, but an “idol” (287: 11), “a maid, so fair, / As Nature could not with his art compare” (287: 7-8), while her other characteristics seem, at best, secondary. This issue is further discussed in “Mrs Beast”, but also touched upon in “Mrs Quasimodo” where the narrator’s husband starts to “find fault” (Duffy 36: 68) with her, “sweet-tempered” (34: 5) though she might be, and instead starts to “watch the pin-up gipsy” (36: 75). Mrs Quasimodo’s appearance might cause her pain in this poem, but the suffering of the so-called “pin-up gipsy”, unfairly treated by Duffy, must be greater. Like Galatea, her beauty and innocence cause her to be adored to the point of obsession, causing the young girl, initially “vive, insouciant, joyeuse, parée, dansante, ailée, harmonieuse” to end up “en chemise, [...] la corde au cou, montant lentement [...] l’échelle anguleuse du gibet” (Hugo 428) (“bright, carefree, joyful, adorned, dancing, winged, harmonious”, “in a chemise, [...] the rope around her neck, slowly mounting [...] the angular ladder of the gallows” (my translation)). In all of these cases, male conceptions of beauty thus act as a curse on women: in Galatea’s and Esmeralda’s case because of their conceived beauty, and in Mrs Quasimodo’s case due to her perceived ugliness.

Much like the relationship depicted in “Little Red-Cap”, the relationship between Pygmalion and Galatea seems predestined to fail, provided that both parties are allowed to be individuals in their own rights. As the title suggests, Galatea has traditionally been portrayed as “Pygmalion’s Bride”, a mere aesthetic construction, but in giving her an identity that is based on something more than male notions of female beauty and virtue, Duffy enables her to

“[change] tacks” (52: 39) and get freed of her creator. In doing so, however, she has to “[kiss] back” (52: 41) and, in McEwen’s words, “prostitute herself” (McEwen 7), which indicates that Duffy’s Galatea is obliged to become more like the voluptuous women shunned by the prudish Pygmalion in order to be rid of him, regardless of whether or not that is her true identity. In conclusion, the same can be said for “Pygmalion’s Bride” as for “Little Red-Cap” in that both deal with social conditions, based on gender discrimination, which undeniably have an effect upon the behaviour of the characters. Rather than any differences in gender characteristics, it is these kinds of social pressures and injustices that influence the outcomes of the relationships, and which ultimately cause them to fail.

2.2. Transgression of gender norms

Although not allowing traditional gender norms to work in a constrictive way on her characters, Duffy does make use of stereotypical conceptions of masculinity and femininity in order to challenge them. One way of doing this is to let characters transgress these gender norms, which is exemplified in poems such as “Mrs Beast” and “Delilah” below. Moreover, the assumption that there is such a thing as gender specific traits will be discussed.

2.2.1. “Mrs Beast”

As mentioned above, “Mrs Beast” explores the possible implications of beauty in relationships, and seems to advocate the search for something other than the conventionally beautiful. Duffy commences the poem by letting the narrator state that she is going to “put [the myths going around] straight” (72: 2), and let women know that men are “bastards when they’re Princes” (72: 13). The Little Mermaid, for instance, “slit / her shining silver tail in two” (72: 6-7), “stood up and smiled, waltzed” (72: 9), and all this “for a Prince, a pretty boy” (72: 10), who goes on to “dump her in the end” (72: 11). The fact that she, in Duffy’s version,

suitably enough does this “in fishnet tights” (72: 9) suggests that she is painstakingly trying to conform to the beauty norms imposed upon her in human society, and the narrator would have advised her to act quite differently, departing from beauty norms: “What you want to do is to find yourself a Beast” (72: 14). In this poem it is the narrator, with a face compared to “Helen’s [...], Cleopatra’s, / Queen of Sheba’s, Juliette’s” (72: 3-4), that chooses to venture to the beast’s abode, “knowing [her] own mind” (72: 16). It is she who “[has] the language” (73: 33), the advantage, and it is she who takes on the role historically preserved for the other sex. Duffy thus swaps the conventional gender roles around, but this does not make the relationship any more successful as the dynamic remains detrimental: regardless of which gender holds the more powerful position or which individual, in Duffy’s words, is “the less loving one” (75: 92).

The poem can thus be viewed as exemplifying that independence often comes at a cost; in Galatea’s case it is the cost of her own body, and in Mrs Beast’s case the cost of a loving relationship. Instead of going all in and making herself vulnerable, she chooses not to run the risk of getting hurt; she takes a different route than Marilyn Monroe (74: 71) and Diana (74: 75), and reserves the gambling for the poker table. In Duffy’s own words, Mrs Beast is “Little Red-Cap grown up, with her own money” (Duffy, *Sheer Poetry* interview), who is decisively done taking lessons, “no longer a girl” (72: 16), but who has all the same ended up isolated.

2.2.2. “Delilah”

The conventional gender roles might not be swapped around in Duffy’s poem based on the legend of Samson and Delilah, but nonetheless transgression of gender norms is dealt with. The relationship here described seems significantly more auspicious than those in the poems discussed above, as the two lovers, “lying in bed” (28: 2), are able to speak to each other, Samson opening up to Delilah and sharing his intimate feelings. According to esteemed

Canadian psychologist Sidney Jourard, this feat is “often considered the hallmark of a close relationship” (Peplau et al. 258). As early as in the first stanza, however, the reader is informed that everything is not well as Samson evidently does not know “how to care” (28: 3). Samson, the epitome of physical strength who fears nothing (28: 14) and who “[has] to be strong” (28: 20), seems trapped in a role which he does not wish to play, which works as an impediment in his relationship with Delilah. His desire to change, to gain the ability to be “gentle, or loving, or tender” (28: 19), can be said to “point towards the apparent lack entailed by ideas of masculinity” (Peukert 6), but also, as Peukert goes on to argue, “confirms that caring can be learned, which means that it is not necessarily or naturally attached to women or unattainable by men” (6). As Samson asks Delilah to teach him (28: 1), his sincerity appears as convincing to the reader as to Delilah, who feels “sure / that he [wants] to change” (29: 29-30), and judging by the fact that he is sharing his innermost feelings, the change has already begun to take place. The mere asking for help, in the sanctuary of the shared bed, seems an indication of tenderness and his voice has already become “for a change, a soft burr” (29: 27), matching his body as he “[softens] and [sleeps]” (29: 33). Moreover, he takes on the role as the more vulnerable one even before his physical strength is taken away along with his “black and biblical hair” (29: 38), as Duffy lets him helplessly “slip and slide and sprawl [...] / on the floor” (29: 35-36), while Delilah shoulders the role of resolute protector, “[fastening] the chain on the door” (29: 39) and taking the scissors to his hair “with deliberate [...] hands” (29: 41).

This ability to change supports Judith Butler’s view that “gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time” (Butler 22); it might even be argued that Duffy in poems such as this one “[questions] the assumption of there being natural male and female subjects” (Peukert 6). In addition, the poem indicates that the maintaining of a successful relationship is a possibility, and communication seems to

be the key offered by Duffy to this potential success. This notion will be further discussed in a later section.

2.2.3. Questioning of gender specific traits

As exemplified in “Delilah”, traditional gender norms do not have to dictate individual traits, and one might potentially benefit from transgressing them. In *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf argues that the balance between traditionally male and female characteristics is of particular importance when it comes to creativity, observing that creative minds such as Shakespeare, Keats and Coleridge were all more or less androgynous (Woolf 102). Furthermore, she argues that all human beings are made up of male and female, and that “the normal comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together” (Woolf 97). This is a notion that is also explored by Ursula K. Le Guin who in the utopian *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) discusses the need for balance and the virtue of “possessing both male and female qualities” (Bernardo et al. 30).

The very existence of gender specific qualities, however, can be viewed as questionable, and in *Undoing Gender* Butler goes on to argue that “terms such as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ are notoriously changeable” (Butler 10), which would effectually render them void of importance. In speaking of androgyny, a term which can be viewed as “conservative insofar as it merely combines formerly female-associated and male-associated characteristics, whereas some of them, such as dominance and servitude, should be dropped altogether” (Peel 69), one unavoidably acknowledges that being female or male entails a set of fixed and predetermined characteristics, while terms of gender designation historically are, in Butler’s words, “never settled once and for all but are constantly in the process of being remade” (Butler 10). There thus appears to be no perpetual distinctions between male and female, and the very existence of gender norms might be questioned on the grounds that “it is a form of

social power that produces the intelligible field of subjects, and an apparatus by which the gender binary is instituted” (Butler 48). Taking this notion a step further, limiting gender to something binary, exclusively “masculine” or “feminine”, excludes permutations of gender that do not fit into either category, but that are “as much part of gender as its most normative instance” (Butler 42).

2.3. Successful heterosexual relationships

In her depiction of the relationship between Samson and Delilah, Duffy touches upon the possibility of attaining a prosperous relationship. Through communication, the two people can manage to meet on the same level, regardless of alleged gender differences, and in “Anne Hathaway” Duffy further explores the significance of language in a relationship.

The poem deals with the feelings of Anne Hathaway following the death of her husband, William Shakespeare, who famously in his will left her nothing but the second best bed. There has been an immense amount of speculation regarding this modest inheritance, and although there are historians who argue that it “shows that he felt that [she] would be well taken care of by Susanna and her husband”, that is their eldest daughter and their son-in-law, “and therefore needed no resources of her own” (Pogue 73), many hold the opinion that the act betrays a distinct dislike in Shakespeare for his wife. In volume 63 of his *Shakespeare Survey* Peter Holland observes that Stephen Greenblatt’s *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (2004), perhaps the most widely distributed Shakespeare biography, “includes one of the most negative portrayals of Anne Hathaway ever written” (Holland 232), and that the intensity with which the author “denigrates [her] throughout his biography is striking” (Holland 233). Duffy, however, opposes the view held by such biographers and depicts the relationship between the two as anything but a “loveless marriage” (Holland 232). Instead of perceiving the second best bed as a contumely or some sort of punishment, Duffy’s Anne

fondly views it as “the bed [they] loved in” (30: 1), and keeps her “living laughing love – / [...] in the casket of [her] widow’s head / as he held [her] upon that next best bed” (30: 14-16). For her, their conjugal bed has been a place of intimacy and passionate poetry, whereas the occupants of the best bed, probably “being saved for guests” (Proudfoot et al. 3), simply “[dribble] their prose” (30: 14).

Poetry thus seems to play an important role in their relationship, and the poem is suitably enough written in the form of a sonnet; consisting of fourteen lines and ending in a couplet. The bed is described as a place for “romance and drama” (30: 11-12), “a spinning world / of forests, castles, torchlight, clifftops” and “sea” (30: 1-2), and Duffy depicts their shared space as being a crucial part of Shakespeare’s works, referring to the bed as “a page beneath his writer’s hand” (30: 9). In a way Anne herself becomes part of it, even to such an extent that she imagines being one of his creations: “Some nights, I dreamed he’d written me” (30: 8). This notion, however, seems to indicate closeness rather than possession, and in stark contrast to the case of Pygmalion and Galatea there appears to be love and tenderness rather than violence and animosity between the couple. Neither is language portrayed in a negative way, as in “Eurydice” where the narrator feels “safe” (58: 16) from her poet in “the place where language stopped / [...] / where words had to come to an end” (58: 4-6), or used as a tool as in “Mrs Beast” where the possession of language goes hand in hand with being the powerful one in a relationship (73: 33). Whereas Mrs Beast can “taste the stars / on the tip of [her] tongue” (75: 84-85) in the cold night, standing isolated and alone, Anne warmly remembers “[her] lover’s words” (30: 3) as “shooting stars which fell to earth as kisses / on [her] lips” (30: 4-5). The positive presence of language even lingers on after Shakespeare’s death, only serving to make Anne’s “body [...] a softer rhyme / to his, now echo, assonance” (30: 5-6).

In this poem, Duffy thus describes something that is only sensed as a possibility in “Delilah”, namely that language and communication can be powerful means of bringing two

people closer together. Here, no one is the sole owner of language, and it can therefore go hand in hand with tenderness. Simultaneously, however, the poem alludes to the impossibility of knowing someone simply through language, as the many theories pertaining to the nature of the relationship between Shakespeare and his wife cannot compare to the lost knowledge possessed by Anne herself. Moreover, there seems to be no conflict between gender norms in the poem, whether real or imagined; and whereas this can be attributed to Shakespeare's supposed androgyny (Woolf 102), it could also be ascribed to a mere lack of interest in dividing gender into the two opposing poles "masculine" and "feminine". As neither Anne nor her late husband are described in terms of gender but simply as two individuals, content with each other, there is no struggle over language or power, and no dissension ever arises between them throughout the poem.

Chapter 3: Relationships between women

To some extent, although there are instances where heterosexual relationships appear to be successful, Duffy could be viewed as questioning whether they are generally feasible. Anne Hathaway and Delilah might get along well with their spouses in the marital bed, which for them is a place of refuge where emotions can be shared more readily than out in the hard-hearted world. But this does not necessarily signify that the couples will be able to transfer their ability to communicate into the real world. In the midst of all the poems depicting heterosexual relationship, Duffy introduces one between two women in “*from Mrs Tiresias*”, which will be further examined in the following section.

3.1. “*from Mrs Tiresias*”

Duffy’s poem is based on the legend of Tiresias, a personage in Greek mythology, who is turned into a woman as punishment after having come upon two snakes mating and killing the female one. In Duffy’s version, the only explanation offered concerning Tiresias’ transformation is that “he went out for his walk a man / and came home female” (14: 1-2), and after the initial shock his wife accepts the state of things, simply stating that “Life has to go on” (15: 33). Things, however, do not proceed as smoothly as she might have hoped, and in spite of “kind” (15: 15) and “sisterly” (15: 42) treatment he snaps at her for trying to kiss him in public, arguing that he “[*doesn’t*] want folk getting the wrong idea” (16: 57), and they eventually go their separate ways.

The emerging conflict between the two, however, does not necessarily indicate that they cannot get along simply because both are women. Quite on the contrary, the narrator describes her husband as a rather smug character, pertinaciously writing to *The Times* after hearing “the first cuckoo of spring” (14: 11), although the narrator usually hears it “days

before him” (14: 17) without letting on, and leaving the house complacently “Whistling” (14: 9). That said, the relationship does not get any better once Tiresias becomes a woman and “[demands] full paid menstrual leave twelve weeks per year” (16: 50), assuming a “selfish pale face” (16: 52) and speaking of “*the curse*” (16: 54), and once separated he moves on to “the arms of powerful men” (16: 62).

What is noteworthy about Tiresias’ transformation is that in becoming a woman he only does so superficially, in Anthony Rowland’s words, “only [copying] female traits to produce a parody of women” (Rowland 71). He never fully succeeds in getting the voice right (17: 72-3) and remains artificial, much like the “cling peach slithering out of its tin” (17: 74) to which Duffy compares his voice. Like the stone of the cling-peach, Tiresias’ core is not easily removed from the superficial flesh and his persona does not seem to alter throughout the poem, regardless of his sex or gender adherence. Furthermore, in physically changing but never mastering the new voice, Tiresias does not successfully acquire the means of communicating with his wife on equal footing.

It seems, however, that something good has come from the experience as the narrator, who initially appears embarrassed about pursuing a relationship with someone appearing to be of the same sex and puts it about that the woman is her husband’s visiting twin sister (15: 34-36), realises that holding the “soft [...] shape” (15: 42) of a woman is an actual possibility. By the final part of the poem she has entered a new relationship which, judging by the descriptions of “the blaze of [her lover’s] skin” (17: 83) and “the slow caress of her hand on the back of [the narrator’s] neck” (17: 84), seems to be of a more sensual nature. As the new lover is pictured “[biting] at the fruit of [the narrator’s] lips” (17: 16), and the latter’s passionate “red wet cry in the night” (17: 89) is imagined by the presumably jealous former husband, Rowland observes that “the traditional amorous sign, fruit, is re-written as a symbol of lesbian eroticism” and goes on to state that poems such as “*from Mrs Tiresias*” “[negate]

any requirement for an amorous masculinity in *The World's Wife*" (Rowland 72). This statement seems justifiable insofar as Mrs Tiresias, the only woman in the collection to pursue the possibility of a homosexual relationship, appears get the best of it, whereas her former husband comes off the loser. By insisting on partaking only in heterosexual relationships, stifled by what people might think, Tiresias misses out on what a relationship with another woman might have had to offer, and the poem can be seen as underlining the view that sex is of no importance when it comes to maintaining a successful relationship. Indeed, even gender seems to be insignificant as the new lover, with whom the narrator appears to be happy, is not described in terms of possible gender-specific behaviour.

What does seem important, however, is once again communication. "The one thing [Tiresias] never got right / was the voice" (17: 72-73), and the lack of communication between him and the narrator can also be perceived in that the latter cannot, not even in the potential refuge of their marital bed, reveal to her husband that she hears the first cuckoo of spring before he does (14: 13-17). In addition, there is a physical distance between her and Tiresias, who does not wish to be "[kissed] [...] in public" (16: 55) for fear of being judged, while the physical closeness between the narrator and her new lover, who does not seem opposed to public displays of affection (17: 84), is palpable. This difference seems to hint at the importance of physical communication, but the mere use of it is not enough as the message conveyed needs to be decoded; this is something which Orpheus, as mentioned above, fails to do when Eurydice "[touches] him once / on the back of his neck" (61: 89-90), even though she accompanies the act with words. In this respect, the narrator and her new lover might have an advantage, as Judith A. Hall, in her article "Gender effects in decoding nonverbal cues", is quoted as indicating that "females [are] better at decoding nonverbal cues than males" (Henley 49). Regardless of this, however, the reader is not provided with much information about the new lover and her communication skills, although the couple's

closeness, along with the fact that she is the one to reach out to Tiresias and the first of the two to speak (17: 91), does seem to indicate that she is more apt than Tiresias. This, however, can probably be ascribed to the couple having found in each other someone with whom they can get along on an individual level, and although the narrator's chance for such mutual understanding increased as she widened her scope to consider women as well as men, there is no reason why she should not get along just as well with a man more communicative than Tiresias.

Conclusion

To conclude, Duffy in *The World's Wife* certainly does make use of what has conventionally been thought of as gender-specific traits, but in exploring an array of relationships she goes a long way to show that social conditions and individual traits, rather than any gender differences, are the main causes of discord between people. Outmoded conceptions of male strength and female compliancy may influence human behaviour, regardless of sex or gender adherence, but such conceptions in no way form two opposite sets of characteristics, one being masculine and the other feminine. By bringing forth these conceptions Duffy effectively establishes gender norms in order to transgress and disprove them, bringing them under scrutiny, and by playing on conceived gender-specific traits, through the characters in the collection, she demonstrates that gender, although influencing human experience, certainly does not dictate the outcome of relationships. Communication, on the other hand, emerges as a crucial part of prosperous relationships, as shown in poems such as "Anne Hathaway". Whether this kind of communication can be carried out as successfully beyond the refuge of the bedroom remains unclear, but judging by the new relationship in "from Mrs Tiresias", although the communicating couple in this poem happens to consist of two women, there is no need to consider it an impossibility.

In this collection of poems, Duffy thus introduces relationships the outcomes of which go beyond gender, showing that human strengths and failings, possessed by everyone, regardless of gender, are that which shapes all human experience, for better or worse. Consequently, *The World's Wife* ought not to be dismissed as a parade of wives of the past attacking their famous husbands, but as a study in human behaviour and communication, showing the reader that we all are flawed, for various reasons, but that we all possess the ability to, like Samson, reach out to each other, and to recognise and face our individual shortcomings.

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