Criticizing patriarchal traditions through alternative history in Carol Ann Duffy’s *The World’s Wife*

*Kritisering av patriakala traditioner genom alternativ historia i Carol Ann Duffys “The World’s Wife”*

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Introduction

In 2009, Carol Ann Duffy was appointed Poet Laureate in the UK, becoming the first woman to hold the post since its start in 1668. The fact that it took 341 years for the post to be held by a woman comes as no surprise, but speaks of a change toward equality. Duffy is a poet whose poetry has always been strong and feminist, and her first collection *Standing Female Nude* makes that clear. Her poetry consists of social commentary, where she deconstructs and criticizes the patriarchy and traditional gender roles. One of the recurring themes in her oeuvre is a celebration of female sexuality, and the demystification of sex. The collection where her feminist values become most clear is in *The World’s Wife* from 1999, where she subverts myth and history by giving women their own voice. History and literature in the West have long been part of the phallocentric tradition, meaning that they are only interested in the male and male sexual activity. The Western literary canon is filled with stories of men and their adventures and conquests, from Homer’s *Odyssey* to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.

Women have existed as side characters, being only the wives of famous men. The title *The World’s Wife* shows a tacit understanding that the world is male, and women are only the wife. However, in the collection, Duffy shows the wives as more than wives. They are equally as interesting and important as their husbands or male counterparts.

Feminist retellings work to re-write male-centric classics in order to bring women to history and create a more equal representation. The French post-structuralist feminist Hélène Cixous writes in her famous essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976) that:

> Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies - for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text–as into the world and into history – by her own movement. (875)
This is exactly what Duffy does in *The World’s Wife*, as she writes women into history where they previously have been silent side characters. Duffy gives women a voice, and power in their bodies and actions, thereby criticizing the patriarchal and phallocentric traditions.

Cixous wrote about having to bring women into history, and by doing so in the form of retellings Duffy manages to create “new” history, or as some feminists call it: *her-story*.

In *The World’s Wife*, Cixous's theory can be seen in action and the lack of women in history becomes apparent. Duffy’s mix of mythology and history both works to comment on the literary canon but also makes the absence of historic women clear. In other words, she lets the reader, through the poems, understand the historic experience of women which has led us to where we are today. Duffy uses two different strategies to highlight the problem of the lack of women in history, on the one hand, she reimagines stories of mythological women, and on the other, she writes alternative history by reimagining wives of famous men. These strategies make the misogynistic and patriarchal norms of the past stand out as she makes the characters uphold modern feminist ideas. The problem with writing about famous women from history is that there are not that many, and most that exist are written by men. Therefore, as Duffy takes mythological characters and wives she is proving the complexity of telling the history of women, as they have been hidden behind men for most of history.

One of the most common dedications in history is “To my wife”, but we do not know who the wives are. Duffy challenges this historic absence by making the women strong and unapologetically in charge of their stories. Furthermore, by subverting the traditional gender roles Duffy brings ancient mythology to the 20th century, offering retellings that follow the third wave of feminism where the focus lay on post-structuralist interpretations of gender. By reclaiming history as her own, Duffy criticizes both past and present. This can be seen in her use of modern settings and ideals. As Susanna Braund writes in “We’re Here Too, the Ones without Names”, Duffy uses the technique of “making the mythical material unstrange, by
giving it mundane trappings, in what has been well termed a ‘postmodern domestication of myth’, and bringing the world and characters of myth sometimes too close for comfort” (190). The women in the poems could be all of us, and the core problems are problems most women can recognize. Patriarchal and phallocentric traditions have affected women negatively for hundreds of years, and even though gender equality is progressing it cannot erase hundreds of years of marginalization.

In this essay, I am going to argue that Carol Ann Duffy uses reimagination to create an alternative history where famous/known women are given a voice, thereby critiquing the patriarchal structure and challenging gender norms. These women come from mythology and stories in which they mainly appear as side characters in men’s narratives, so they are not entirely erased from history as they still live on today. However, characters like Medusa and Circe are painted as villains who the men fight against, meaning that the most famous women are mere monsters which the men fight. The stories do nothing to share an equal or kind portrayal, which is something many modern authors attempt to change by writing retellings. Furthermore, these feminist retellings of old stories have gained popularity in recent years. Authors like Madeline Miller and Pat Barker have taken on women from myths and history, writing for example about Circe and the women of Troy. They offer an alternative history, just like Duffy, where women are allowed to speak and the reader gains a new perspective on the old phallocentric stories. Furthermore, they criticize the misogynistic treatment of women by giving them a voice and authority over their own stories and thereby giving women something to relate to. Duffy is telling more than just Frau Freud’s story, more than Medusa’s, she is sharing struggles that many women recognize under the guise of myth.

By looking at six poems from the collection (“Mrs Darwin”, “Frau Freud”, “Anne Hathaway”, “Circe”, “Medusa”, and, “Pygmalion's Bride”) it is possible to explore the strategies used by Duffy to convey the historical struggle of being a woman suppressed. The
first three poems were chosen because they deal with real historic wives, as it allowed for the contrast between real and fictional to be explored. The next three poems were chosen because they deal with fictional characters from Greek mythology, as I had chosen to stay away from biblical myths in this essay. The poems represent women being tired of being mistreated which goes along with the intention of looking at how Duffy criticizes patriarchal traditions and how they hurt women.

According to the aim of looking at the strategy of using a mix of mythological and historical figures, the essay will be divided in two chapters, one for the historical figures and one for the mythological characters. In order to understand the poems, background information is also needed, therefore each section will start with a brief summary of the woman in question. Furthermore, I will contextualize the poems in their historical past and their contemporary setting, as Duffy uses intertextuality to comment on the present via the past. For example, the unexpected mention of Ms M. Lewinsky in “Frau Freud” creates a layered ahistorical narrative showing that the phallocentric traditions still occur in our contemporary era. These subtle political statements are part of what makes Duffy’s poetry so important for the feminist movement and the literary canon. Duffy is subverting the patriarchal idea that men are superior by letting women speak their perspective, a perspective which has historically been suppressed.

The Wives of Famous Men

Historically, women have been the possession of men, and therefore they have not been able to make a name for themself. They have been confined to the role of daughter or wife, acting as an accessory to the man. Men have been the scientists, the philosophers, the breadwinners, and the decision-makers. With this collection, Duffy tries to show an alternative side of
history, where women stand out as the subject and not as an accessory. Throughout the collection, Duffy uses dramatic monologue to skillfully portray the personas and their inner thoughts, while simultaneously, as Ian Gregson puts it, revealing “one of the most important motives of Duffy’s work - the desire to give a voice to those who are habitually spoken for” (1996, 99). She is making a political statement by layering the dramatic monologue with double meaning and criticisms of society. Gregson states that “the power of her work arises from the persuasiveness both of her depiction of the distortive ways in which women are represented [...] and of her condemnation of these distortions. Moreover, she manages to do both, to depict and to condemn” (106). In the poems “Mrs Darwin” and “Frau Freud” the depiction and condemnation is very clear, especially in “Frau Freud” where she ridicules Freud’s theory of penis envy in a humorous but serious way.

The three poems this chapter will deal with are the aforementioned “Mrs Darwin” and “Frau Freud” which critique their husband's research, and then “Anne Hathaway” which depicts Shakespeare's widowed wife. Antony Rowland states that the in the satirical poems in the collection “only Shakespeare survives relatively unscathed” (212), which can be seen in the fact that Anne Hathaway has her own name and is not Mrs Shakespeare. The significance of having your own name is huge, and with the contrasts between the poems Duffy is making that clear. Furthermore, it is both in the different levels of commentary within the poems and between the different poems that Duffy’s political stance becomes clear. She is subverting traditional ideals as well as history, making women the subject instead of the passive object.

**Mrs Darwin**

“Mrs Darwin” is the shortest poem in the collection, consisting of only four lines, which alludes to Charles Darwin both in form and content. It is written like a journal entry, with a date at the top and a description of an event below. This form is significant because it mimics
Charles Darwin's journal writing, as he kept a journal of his scientific discoveries and significant personal events. Darwin is known for his theory of natural selection, collected in his book *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859). He is said to be the father of evolution and has been highly praised due to his discovery. However, in the poem the journal entry is by his wife, Mrs Darwin, or more accurately Emma. It describes a trip they took to the Zoo, where she notes that a chimpanzee reminds her of her husband.

The understated form of the poem does nothing to stop Duffy from managing to discredit both Charles Darwin and his claim of discovering natural selection. The first line of the poem is “7 April 1852”, which is significant because it is dated seven years prior to the publication of *On the Origin of Species*. The year 1852 also creates a subtle rhyme with “Zoo” and “you”, and, while subtle, this reminds the reader that it is a poem and not just a journal entry. Furthermore, as the date indicates this entry is written prior to Darwin's discovery and therefore suggests that it was Emma who made the connection between apes and humans. She writes:

“I said to Him -

Something about that Chimpanzee over there reminds me of you.” (lines 3-4)

This simple statement is on the surface a mocking one, where she compares her husband to a chimpanzee. However, since the reader knows about the theory of evolution it gains a more significant double meaning. Darwin is widely quoted as having made the connection between humans and chimpanzees, but what this poem does is question this belief. Furthermore, the capitalization of Chimpanzee strengthens that is the theory Duffy wants to discredit with the statement. The insult made also adds humor and alludes to the husband-wife dynamic, where she compares him to an animal.

Moreover, the mocking and capitalization criticize the grandness of Darwin, as he has become almost godlike in history. The capitalization of “Him” (line 3) is often connotated
with God, and therefore Darwin is associated with God here. Men in history often receive
god-like status, but very rarely women, which is what Duffy is trying to show in this
collection. Men like Darwin gain sole responsibility for discoveries, which should be
questioned according to Duffy. It becomes ironic having Emma write him with a capital “H”
and then comparing him to a chimpanzee, as perhaps he sees himself as god and his ego has
gotten the better of him, which Emma acknowledges and then ridicules. She brings him down
to earth, and by doing so criticizes the patriarchal society which gives him the space to
become God-like. It is a society that promotes the individual genius of men, however, it
easily becomes exaggerated. Cixous writes that:

“Nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason, of which
it is at once the effect, the support, and one if the privileged alibis. It has been one with
the phallocentric tradition. It is indeed that same self-admiring, self-stimulating, self-
congratulatory phallocentrism.” (879)

This passage summarizes what Duffy is trying to show, that history is filled with Men
(capital M) who gain genius status due to the patriarchal and phallocentric norm in society.
Women are blocked from reason and history due to the structures which allow men to rise.
If Emma had been the one to make the initial discovery, there would not be a way for her
to get recognition for it.

Furthermore, the importance of having your own name becomes especially clear in this
poem. Since Emma is Mrs Darwin, she is through language her husband's object, Mr
Darwin’s wife. At the time, her intellectual property would therefore probably have fallen on
him to do with as he wished. Just like later female scientists, like Rosalind Franklin, have had
men take credit for their work. In Giving Voice to the Voiceless: A Feminist Approach to
Carol Ann Duffy’s Poetry, Tisha and Rahman state that “Duffy challenges the faith and
assumption that women remain in the background and are not capable to express their
thoughts against their husbands if they think that they want to” (36). It is true that women could not express their thoughts due to social constrictions, and not due to their inability to want to express themself. However, Duffy also highlights how easily women's contributions are overlooked. Women have stepped up and tried to contribute, but have always been pushed back to the background by society. Furthermore, the insult in this poem works to subvert men’s egoism, bringing them down to humanity where everyone should be equal.

To conclude, “Mrs Darwin” is an impactful poem that, due to its form, speaks directly from the wife of Charles Darwin. A journal entry is an intimate form for sharing one's thoughts and Duffy manages to pack a great amount into four seemingly simple lines. She manages to both call into question Charles Darwin’s ownership of his discovery, and society's glorification of him. While also highlighting the overlooked impact women have on the world. Emma could have been the ignitor for Charles's theory but she is barely known by history as he gained all recognition and credit. She is just Mrs Darwin, known for being his wife and mother to his children, which is common for most historic women.

**Frau Freud**

Similarly to “Mrs Darwin”, “Frau Freud” criticizes the work of a famous man through the words of his wife. In this case, it is the wife of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud. Sigmund Freud was one of the most influential thinkers of the 20th century, and while many of his theories have been debunked from psychology since, he still persists in popular culture. The theory that Duffy references in this poem is his theory on penis envy, which stated that when girls notice that boys have penises they “instantly recognize penises as the superior counterpart of the clitoris, and fall victim to penis envy. “She has seen it and knows that she is without it and wants to have it,” says Freud” (Klages, 45). Freud then, in simplified terms,
states that girls realize their inferiority to the male as they will never be able to attain a penis and therefore always be inferior to boys.

However, in this poem, his theory is reversed, and the fictional version of his wife argues that the penis should be pitied. Her argument consists of naming thirty different synonyms for penis, and ends by saying “ladies, dear ladies, the average penis - not pretty… the squint of its envious solitary eye… one’s feeling of pity…” (lines 13-14). Duffy thereby criticizes the phallocentric worldview by turning envy into pity. Furthermore, the structure of the poem adds to the reversal as it is structured as a sonnet with fourteen lines and a rhyming couplet at the end. As Tisha and Rahman state, the structure itself is satiric and is meant to play on a typical love poem, ridiculing Freud's love for penises (38). Altogether this creates an incredibly vulgar poem, which becomes humorous to those readers who are familiar with Freud’s theory or disagree with the phallocentric practice.

The humor in this poem stems from its contrast between the form of a structured argument and the crude naming of synonyms for penis. The first line starts with “Ladies, for argument’s sake”, which sounds like a formal address to an audience of ladies, however, the second line ends with “I’ve seen my fair share of ding-a-ling, member and jock”. The contrast between “ladies” and slang terms for the penis is a striking one, especially as Frau Freud would be contemporary with the Victorian era and these words would not exist then. Therefore, both the contrast and juxtaposition in the poem add to the humor. Freud lived during the late 1800s when the patriarchal hold in society was especially strong, which is evident in his theories on gender. However, here Duffy is making his wife a highly progressive/controversial feminist who is making a statement about the phallocentric idea of penis superiority. Just like “Mrs Darwin” this poem plays on the husband’s research, however in this case it is questioning the actual theory and not just the patriarchal ownership of ideas.
Freud and his theories have long been under siege by the feminist movement so the choice of Duffy to include it comes as no surprise, however, the content was a surprise. Her ability to make a list of synonyms for penis into an objectively sound poem shows her skill as a writer. She utilizes multiple poetic techniques, such as rhymes (internal and end-rhymes), assonance, and consonance in order to create a sing-song rhythm. While the subjects stand out as wholly unpoetic, the shape and techniques make it poetry. The terms used are quite interesting and can be divided into three categories: childish (like ding-a-ling and willy), phallic objects (like pork sword and salami), and sexual violence (like rammer and slammer). This illustrates the extensive vocabulary that exists around penises and could cause the reader to reflect on the limited terms for the female sex. The inequality in language is something Cixous brings up in her essays, in one instance she states that women have “been turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty” (885) which can be seen in language. The phallocentric tradition in language plays a big role in the suppression of women, as having no language equals silence. Therefore, Duffy criticizes phallocentrism and male self-centeredness on multiple levels in “Frau Freud”, by stating that “the average penis - not pretty…”, and on an underlying level criticizes the inequality in language by highlighting the surplus of words that exists to describe the penis.

Moreover, in the middle of the poem, there is a reference to a “Ms M Lewinsky”

“[...]in fact, you could say, I’m as au fat with Hunt-the Salami as Ms M Lewinsky - equally sick up to here with the beef bayonet, the pork sword, the saveloy, “ (lines 4-7)

The person in question is Monica Lewinsky, who was involved in a sexual scandal with then-president Bill Clinton in the late 1990s. This scandal was therefore very current at the time of
writing for Duffy, and Monica being “sick up to here with the beef bayonet” is not a surprise. According to Diana Owen in “Popular Politics and the Clinton/Lewinsky Affair: The Implications for Leadership”, the scandal “unfolded in an era when “new media” actors, such as talk show hosts, tabloids reporters, and Internet gossip columnists, had entered the political communications scene” (162). This resulted in the scandal becoming entertainment and Owens writes that it can be presumed that people who were users of the new media followed “the Clinton affair as a dramatic sex scandal (rather than a significant political event)” (162). Furthermore, the fact that Clinton was a much older, higher-up man, speaks of exploitation which many women can relate to, and Frau Freud relates to as they are both “sick up to here”. The mention, therefore, criticizes sexual relations where male superiority takes advantage of women. However, Frau Freud humorously concludes that “the average penis - not pretty… / the squint of its envious solitary eye… one’s feeling of pity…” (lines 13-14). Duffy’s use of alliteration and rhyme, with pretty/pity, creates a sense of mockery as Frau Freud sarcastically mocks her husband's penis.

To summarize, the poem “Frau Freud” is a controversial poem that subverts Sigmund Freud's theory on Penis Envy and turns it into penis pity. It is a blatant criticism of the phallocentric idea and of the male ego in regard to their sex and the many names they give it. It also criticizes the exploitation of the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal, broadening the criticism from the late 1800s to the present. The poem juxtaposition brings humor and, as Anthony Rowland states, a refreshing “total rejection of the heterosexual male” (214). However, due to its unpoetic content, it can be controversial, and knowledge of the penis envy theory is essential for full understanding.

**Anne Hathaway**

One of the poems that stand out in *The World’s Wife* is “Anne Hathaway”, as she has her own first and last name. She does not follow the patriarchal tradition of only being known by her
husband’s name, instead, she stands as her own. The poem is given context by an extract from Shakespeare’s will, where he wrote “Item I gyve unto my wife my second best bed”, a line which has aroused discussions on whether it was intended as an expression of love or an insult. Through this quote, the reader understands that Anne Hathaway is Shakespeare's wife, whom he married in 1582 when he was 18 and she 26. Together they had three children, who lived in Stratford-upon-Avon with Anne as Shakespeare worked in London. The poem is told from the perspective of Anne as she reminisces about what it was like to share a bed with her husband, and she utilizes the form of the Shakespearian sonnet. In comparison to the subversion of the sonnet seen in “Frau Freud”, this poem is about love.

Furthermore, by placing the excerpt at the top Duffy invites the reader to draw a conclusion on the meaning of the “second best bed”. According to Jing-yun Zeng and Ju-yuan Li, the “‘second best bed’ has been a myth that discredits Anne Hathaway” (376), and Duffy takes a stance for Anne and lets her speak for herself of the love between her and her husband. This analysis will be in accordance with the interpretation that the bed was left in love, as the second best bed would have been their marriage bed, supported by line 11 where the guest doze “in the other bed, the best”. In contrast, Tisha and Rahman interpret it as Anne appearing “second to her husband where his first love is his writing. Even in their bedstead she realizes that she is second best” (35). However, my reading does not support this, as the fantastical descriptions are a sign of the love they had and not of his inattention. The sexual connotations, “where we would dive for pearls” (line 3) that can be interpreted as oral sex, and “his touch / a verb dancing in the center of a noun” (lines 6-7) speak of an equal and loving sex life. Duffy is giving voice to a woman who has been silenced and questioned and presents her as someone who loved and was loved by her husband. Duffy shows that not all relationships are bad, and that love can exist. The poem ends with the final rhyming couplet “I hold him in the casket of my widow’s head/ as he held me upon that next best bed”,


describing how she remembers and cherishes him in death through her memory. This concludes and upholds Duffy’s interpretation that receiving the second best bed was an expression of love.

Moreover, the poem speaks of the lasting power of literature and how Shakespeare’s writing still lives on. It lives on through his wife and through those who read him as he manages to touch their lives as well. Shakespeare is a beloved writer, and many of his plays include strong female characters, for example, Cordelia in *King Lear* (1606) and Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* (1606). Anne compares their passion to poetry, describing the connection between the power of love and language.

> “Some nights, I dreamed he’d written me, the bed
> a page beneath his writer’s hands. Romance
> and drama played by touch, by scent, by taste.
> In the other bed, the best, our guests dozed on,
> dribbling their prose. My living laughing love - ” (lines 8-12)

It becomes clear that Shakespeare is special as the guest dribble their prose, meaning that they do not possess the art of poetry. This poem gives Anne a voice to express her love for her late husband, and it lets Duffy express her love for poetry and how powerful it can be.

There are multiple allusions to Shakespeare’s works, for example, the “spinning world” which is likely a reference to the Globe theatre, and “a verb dancing in the center of a noun” could reference the way he played with words in his writing. Furthermore, the alliteration “living laughing love” plays on the often-mocked slogan “live laugh love”, but uses the present continuous to suggest how he lives on for eternity in her mind.

> “Anne Hathaway” does quite obviously have a different tone than the previous poems, however, the patriarchal and gender norm themes still exist. William Shakespeare is one of the most famous men in history, but his wife and family are mostly unknown. Without the
excerpt from his will, a reader would perhaps not know that Anne Hathaway was his wife. Furthermore, the debate of whether the “second best bed” was an insult or an act of love speaks of gender norms and gender expectations. Throughout the poem, Shakespeare is described as an attentive lover, and their lovemaking is on par with his writing. This describes how good a relationship can be and the power it can have on those involved, while simultaneously linking the power and passion to art and writing. Importantly, the positive description of lovemaking differentiates from the other poems in the collection. Thereby, Duffy shows that there are good relationships and that not all men act in accordance with misogyny and phallocentrism.

The Mythological Woman Reimagined

The previous chapter dealt with historical women that existed in relatively recent times, however, a majority of poems in The World’s Wife are about mythological characters from literature. This chapter will analyze the poems “Circe”, “Medusa”, and “Pygmalions Bride”, which all stem from Greek mythology. The stories of these women are partly based on myths found in Ovid's Metamorphoses and Heroides and Homer’s Odyssey, but retellings have been made since before these texts. Susanna Braund states that the subversion of myths is “akin to the project of the Greek intellectual poets of third century BCE Alexandria who set out to reimagine the heroic world from unusual angles”. (190) Taking a myth and rewriting it is therefore not a new concept, but what Duffy does is rewrite these stories from the women's perspective with modern-day ideas. Braund divides the poems into two groups, those representing “men of futile action” and those who “represent what men fear”: unleashed, mature, female sexual energy” (196). In this chapter, I have chosen to focus on poems that represent what men fear because it deals with the perception of women and their behavior. As discussed in “Frau Freud”, female sexuality has long been suppressed and phallocentrism
focuses only on male sexual practices, however as portrayed in “Anne Hathaway”, sex can and should be an equal act. The poems in this chapter focus more on female rage and rebellion against mistreatment. The analysis will therefore investigate the interplay of humor and outrage in Duffy’s rewritings, as she criticizes the phallocentric nature of the myths.

Furthermore, Duffy’s use of dramatic monologue allows previously obscured women to step forward and speak their inner thoughts aloud. These mythological characters have never held the spotlight or been the main character, as they have only been side quests. Circe was an obstacle in Odeusseus's journey, Medusa was a monster to be slain by Perseus, and Galatea was Pygmalion's sculpture. They never got to show their point of view, why they were “monsters” or what they wanted in life. However, Duffy lets them speak, and she has created complex portrayals of them which show the injustice women have faced.

Circe

Circe is a sorceress famous for turning men who come to her island into pigs. She is part of the Greek hero Odysseus' journey, as he and his men end up on her island and she turns them into pigs. A herb protected Odysseus and he could therefore compel her to turn the men back to men. According to some myths, Odysseus then stayed with her for some time on the island, and they had two children. The myth of Circe has often presented Circe as a femme fatale who tricks men to their doom by inviting them in and giving them drugged food which turns them into pigs. However, this poem shows Circe's perspective where her acts are fueled by rightful revenge. Duffy uses dramatic monologue to let Circe describe, in gritty detail, how she prepares and cooks the pigs, while also adding sly critiques of men. Circe is portrayed as a highly critical and man-hating woman who is done with the male species, and now only sees them as pigs. However, the last stanza shows that it has not always been like that: “I, too, once knelt on this shining shore [...] Of course, I was younger then. And hoping for men.” (line 30, 36). These lines offer insight into her actions, and perhaps what fueled her
hatred for men, or as she sees them, pigs. If she was young and naive and hoping that men would be kind, and then instead had her hospitality be taken advantage of, it would explain her behavior. The satirical reversal of power, where Circe enacts control and abuses the pigs, reflects the control and abuse men have enacted over women and their bodies throughout history. Circe is therefore portrayed not as a femme fatale villain, but as a woman tired of taking male abuse.

The themes of power and control are clear in this poem. Duffy is making a strong statement regarding the power and control that men have enacted upon women. However, she is doing it by subverting the gender roles, making Circe the one who abuses and controls. Duffy uses satire in the poem as she depicts Circe preparing and cooking the men she has turned into pigs. She has full control and seems to take great pleasure in meticulously preparing their body parts, and she shares this with the nereids and nymphs who live on her island. Already in the first four lines of the poem, we see her relationship with the pigs:

I’m fond, nereids and nymphs, unlike some, of the pig,
of the tusker, the snout, the boar and the swine.

One way or another, all pigs have been mine -
under my thumb, the bristling, salty skin of their backs, (lines 1-4)

The end rhyme on lines two and three adds emphasis that the swine are hers, under her control. The anaphora created by repeating “the” emphasizes the listing Circe does as she describes the parts, linking both to a recipe structure and also her cold and objective view of the pigs. She is treating the pigs as nothing more than meat, just like the men used her only for their gain or pleasure. The gruesome descriptions, like “the slit, bulging, vulnerable bag of the balls” (line 28), are emasculating and she seems to enjoy humiliating them. This is presumably as revenge and payback for their treatment of her and other women. In this poem,
Duffy portrays a woman who has grown tired of being mistreated and has taken matters into her own hands to treat men as she thinks they deserve.

Throughout the poem, there are lines that diverge from the instructions for cooking the pig and instead comment on male traits. In lines 15-16, she says “Remember the skills of the tongue - / to lick, to lap, to loosen, lubricate, to lie”, where she uses alliteration and anaphora to highlight the skill of the tongue. The lines suggest that she is critiquing how men lie, convince and seduce in order to get what they want, as she ends on “to lie” the untrustworthiness she feels toward men becomes clear. Then on line 20, she juxtaposes the long description of different pig's faces with “Season with mace.” referring both to the spice and paper spray, alluding to assault and suggesting that the men deserve it. Then, further down, she gives even more reasons for disliking men, or “it”, as she refers to them, “did it listen, ever, to you, to your prayers and rhymes, / to the chimes of your voice, singing and clear?” (lines 24-25). The Nereids and Nymphs have not been listened to, just like women have not been listened to in history. Prayers played a significant role in Greek mythology, as the gods were in control and often would answer prayers or punish those who they felt had wronged them, which will be exemplified in “Medusa” and “Pygmalion’s Bride”. By including the lines about unanswered prayers, Circe is justifying her hatred and her actions. Duffy is inviting the reader to look at Circe through Circe's eyes and lets her speak of her hatred uninterrupted.

The poem might seem dehumanizing and misandrist, and Circe's vengeance cruel, however, the reversal of power goes along with the themes throughout the poems in The World's Wife. Patriarchal societies have historically been misogynistic and viewed women as inferior, and this poem acts as a satirical reversal of that misogyny where Circe is dehumanizing the men as she turns them into pigs and later food. However, as she writes on line 12 “and the tongue in cheek”, the poem might appear serious, but should be taken with a
grain of salt, meaning that is not as serious at it might appear. If the poem should be taken as a joke or a serious critique of male behavior is up to the reader. What stands true is the fact that it is Circe's point of view and she is speaking up about how she sees men. In the last stanza the reader understands that these feelings come from experiences where men abused her hospitality on the island, as she states that “[o]f course, I was younger then. And hoping for men. Now, / let us baste that sizzling pig on the spit once again” (lines 36-37). By rhyming men/again a form of blitheness is created, suggesting a nonchalant dismissal of her previous innocence. The alliteration and onomatopoeia in sizzling spit also add to the cheerful tone and Circe's nonchalant treatment of the pigs.

In conclusion, Circe takes center stage as she describes to the nereids and nymphs how to cook pigs. While Circe may previously have only been known as an enchantress who lured men in to turn them into animals, through this poem, readers are given a new perspective on her actions. The reversal of power is significant and quite unusual, as the total domination and humiliation of the other sex is quite extreme, yet in Circe’s eyes, it is justified. Duffy is portraying a woman who had been wronged to the point of enacting revenge and justifies the revenge by referring to common male faults and their tactics for mistreating women. Furthermore, the language of the poem is bold, the anaphora and alliteration reflect a recipe while the content is highly satirical. The repetition of “dice it small” in lines 29 and 30 could represent how the men's behavior forced Circe to destroy her heart, leaving her cold and revenge-driven. The dramatic monologue lets her speak for herself, showing that she is acting out of experience rather than being just an evil enchantress placed in Odysseus' path.

Medusa

There are many versions of the Medusa myth, some, such as the version in Hesiod’s *Theogony*, state that she was born a Gorgon and some, such as in Ovid, state that she was
turned into a Gorgon by the Goddess Athena (Glennon). Ovid’s version is the most well-known and Duffy probably used that version of the myth for her poem “Medusa”. Ovid describes Medusa as a beautiful mortal who is either seduced, or raped, by Poseidon in a temple of Athena. Athena saw this as sacrilege and as gods did not punish other gods, Athena punished Medusa for Poseidon's sin. Athena turned her into a Gorgon, giving her snakes for hair and the power of turning anyone she look at into stone. Thereby, Medusa’s human beauty is destroyed and all chances of love are removed as she turns everything to stone. Medusa is later beheaded by Perseus, and she becomes his great conquest, bringing him glory for killing a monster. The image of Medusa has become symbolic, and feminists have reclaimed her as a figure representing a woman punished for sex or rape. Medusa today is seen as a symbol of strength and power, often in relation to having experienced sexual assault.

Duffy’s poem “Medusa” is told through dramatic monologue, where Medusa describes her transformation into the snake-haired Gorgon. The transformation is not performed by an outside force, but by her own mind due to the destructive nature of jealousy and rage as she starts to suspect that her husband is cheating on her. In the poem, we know that Medusa is married, but in the myth, marriage is not mentioned. However, the act of sex, or rape, would have been traditionally seen as a consummation of marriage making Medusa Poseidon’s wife. The poem starts by describing how Medusa becomes suspicious of her husband's faithfulness, as their marriage is set in modern times where faithfulness is normally expected.

A suspicion, a doubt, a jealousy
grew in my mind,
which turned the hairs on my head to filthy snakes
as though my thoughts
hissed and spat on my scalp (lines 1-5)
Thoughts can poison the mind, and as she personifies the thoughts, stating that they “grew”, we see that they are consuming her. Furthermore, the use of “filthy” portrays her disgust with what is happening to her thoughts as she battles with this jealousy of being betrayed by her husband. In line 6, “[m]y bride’s breath soured, stank”, there are two alliterations, the first one connotates the relationship they had as bride and groom, but the second alliteration quickly destroys that image by describing the decay of the relationship. The relationship has turned sour, and Medusa is paying the price as she becomes transformed by jealousy and rage. In the fourth stanza, “a buzzing bee” and “a singing bird” get turned into stone, depicting how the rage has become a destructive force that harms everyone, not just her unfaithful husband. In stanza six, her transformation is complete as she is unrecognizable to herself, the mirror now shows a Gorgon (line 33). Duffy is displaying the power that jealousy, rage, and heartbreak can have on a person, giving Medusa a backstory for her transformation. If we were to read the myth metaphorically, one could argue that being mistreated and emotionally hurt can result in a change of personality. The ability to turn everything into stone could represent the inability to let anyone close, in fear of being punished again.

Suspicion, doubt, and jealousy are misogynistic tropes about women, and as the reader gains sympathy for Medusa they become antagonistic towards the responsible man. In stanza three, her love for her husband is apparent “It’s you I love, / perfect man, Greek God, my own;”, however, next she states “but I know you’ll go, betray me, stray / from home.” He is the one who makes the choice to leave, to disregard her as his wife. Continuing in the last stanza, she writes:

And here you come
with a shield for a heart
and a sword for a tongue
Comparing him to Perseus, who came with a shield and a sword to behead her in the myth, creates the image of her husband as driven by fame and conquests. Furthermore, “his girls” clearly show that her suspicion of unfaithfulness was correct and her rage justified. However, as she states “Wasn’t I beautiful / Wasn’t I fragrant and young?” (lines 40-41), her insecurity and despair caused by his actions become clear. He has made her into a monster, and all the blame falls on her (just like Poseidon received no blame in the myth). Duffy is criticizing the misogynistic treatment of women as property to be used and discarded without consequences. In the previously discussed poem, Duffy represents Circe as a misandrist who treat the pigs (men) as nothing more than meat. In this poem, in contrast, we see the consequences of being treated as nothing more than a body to be discarded.

Cixous states in “The Laugh of the Medusa” that “[y]ou only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she's laughing” (885). This is stated in the context of the “dark continent” which represents the unexplored woman, which has been kept unexplored by the “phallogocentric sublation, [with] its militant, regenerati[on] [of] the old patterns, anchored in the dogma of castration” (885). Cixous urging the reader to look at Medusa straight suggest the need to look beyond and undo the misogynistic image of women as less worthy and less important than men. Throughout the collection, Duffy is presenting women from women's perspectives, writing women into history and challenging the patriarchal image, thereby looking at Medusa straight on. Susan R. Bowers explores this idea in terms of the male gaze in “Medusa and the Female Gaze”, where she states that the “figure of Medusa, that primary trope of female sexuality, is a good example of how profoundly the male gaze structures both male and female perceptions of women and of the antidote to the male gaze” (217). The antidote is the same as what Cixous suggests, that by using the female gaze to look at Medusa we will be able to go past the misogynistic image.
and see her as the powerful being that she is. Bowers writes that “patriarchal males have had to make Medusa - and by extension, all women - the object of the male gaze as a protection against being objectified themselves by Medusa’s female gaze” (220), meaning that men are protecting themselves by destroying female subjectivity.

Altogether, the poem “Medusa” works to criticize the misogynistic and male-centric view of women by portraying a woman who is wronged by her husband, to the point of losing herself. This story represents a common pattern of women’s reactions to wrongdoings against them, where they are seen as punishable and deserving of the mistreatment by the patriarchal man. The poem highlights the man's refusal to take responsibility for the way he hurt her, instead, he shows up with a shield and a sword. As he takes new girls, the behavior will most likely repeat itself, as it has done throughout history. However, as Cixous and Bowers state Medusa is/and can be used as a symbol for female empowerment, as she is an embodiment of misogynistic tropes, but by looking at her straight on the truth will be revealed. The truth is that Medusa is a creation of the male gaze, and by claiming her, and viewing her with the female gaze, women will take back their agency.

**Pygmalion's Bride**

Lastly, “Pygmalion’s Bride” could be considered one of the less complex poems in the collection, but it does not make it any less impactful. Pygmalion is a sculptor from Ovid’s Metamorphoses, who was repulsed by the Propoitiides (the first prostitutes) and decided to live a celibate life. However, that did not stop him from crafting “the perfect woman” out of snow-white ivory. He falls in love with the statue and begs Venus to turn her into flesh so she can become his actual wife, and his will is granted. This statue was much later given the name Galatea (Chaliakopoulos). Duffy imitates Ovid closely as she describes how he falls in love with Galatea, kisses her, speaks to her, and brings her presents. What differs is that
Duffy is telling it from the perspective of Galatea, and she does not share Pygmalion’s feelings. The poem starts with “Cold, I was, like snow, like ivory. / I thought He will not touch me, / but he did” (lines 1-3), clearly portraying the issue Duffy wants to discuss. The story of Pygmalion is problematic as he sets out to create “the perfect woman” as he is repulsed by actual women, he then falls in love with his creation and wants her to come alive. She is forced into existence, and he forces himself upon her without ever thinking about her wants.

Ovid’s story is about art and love, but also about the male fantasy. Duffy portrays the problematic nature of idealization and fantasy and how women have, since the start of history, had to find “tack[s]” (line 39) for fending off men. Pygmalion is in the first five stanzas trying to show “love” to the statue, which we as readers understand is fully unwelcomed by her. Pygmalion touches her without permission, kissing her “stone-cold lips” as she “lay[s] still / as though I’d died” (lines, 4-5), and telling her “blunt endearments, what he’d do and how. / His words were terrible “ (lines, 10-11). As the story of Pygmalion is shifted in perspective, it becomes evident how wrong the situation is. He is falling in love and acting upon his feeling towards someone who is giving no reaction, no expression of mutual enjoyment, not even a sign of life. The problem with the male fantasy presented is that Pygmalion desires passivity, he falls in love with the idea of a passive woman. He wants the perfect patriarchal woman who submits fully to the man, as seen when he calls her his bride before she even utters a word or shows a sign of life. Stanza five shows his disregard for her body and her “purity”, something he expressed value in when he was disgusted by the Propoitides for their sexual immorality,

“His nails were claws.

I showed no scratch, no scrape, no scar.

He propped me up on pillows,
He has moved her onto the bed, trying to get a reaction from her body, but she shows no reaction. Pygmalion's want of a passive woman becomes clear in the sixth stanza when she changes “tack” (line 39) and takes initiative in sex: “got hot, got wild” (line 44), and “begged for his child” (line 46). The last two lines show her success “And I haven’t seen him since. / Simple as that”, her change in tack, therefore, took her from the passive to the active which scared him off.

The assertive woman is a constant theme throughout The World’s Wife, as Duffy portrays women who do not submit to the patriarchal ideal. “Pygmalion’s Bride” does not submit to the patriarchal ideal as Galatea does not submit to Pygmalion's advances. The poem is a satire of men falling in love with ideas of women, statues of women, but in reality, they are terrified of a woman who asserts herself. Braund summarizes the poem by stating that it “is a straightforward satire on men who like their women passive but who are terrified when a woman takes the sexual initiative: ‘Simple as that’ (197). Pygmalion's fear of female sexual initiative is clear as he disappears as she changes tack. However, what is also visible in this poem is the tactics women have had to develop in order to fend off men.

“So I changed tack,
grew warm, like candle wax,
kissed back,
was soft, was pliable,
began to moan,
got hot, got wild,
arched, coiled, writhed,
begged for his child,
and at the climax
screamed my head off - all an act.

And haven’t seen him since.
Simple as that.” (lines 39-51)

The lines “all an act” and “Simple as that” show that her behavior was a calculated act, and the abruptness of the lines in comparison with the previous stanzas show her change in tack as she becomes more assertive. As Ying Zhou states in *A Space Created Within: A Non-Subversive Way of Subversion in Carol Ann Duffy”s The World’s Wife* “it is easy to see [...] how manly power and the desire for control is melting down just because of a simple turn in her tact [sic]” (134). Duffy tackles the patriarchy with sarcasm and humor, not by violence. “Pygmalion’s Bride” is a perfect example of how she mixes seriousness and humor in order to criticize the history of phallocentrism. “Simple as that” reveals that Galatea has gained autonomy as she is not dominated by Pygmalion anymore, instead she is the one manipulating. Pygmalion, who idealized the *perfect woman*, cannot deal with the autonomy that comes with his bride owning her sexual pleasures and wants.

In summary, like most poems in the collection, the poem “Pygmalion’s Bride” problematizes the concept of bride and wife. She is his bride, and he feels that he can do whatever to her and fall in love with her without getting to know her. The idealization and objectification of women is a problem, however, here the bride Galatea shows that she can change tack and gain autonomy. The ending of this poem gives hope that women can go against the objectification, and “scare” away the men who only see them as a possession. The last two lines “And haven’t seen him since. / Simple as that.” could be read as Duffy bringing us to the present, by showing that it is attainable to get rid of the patriarchal hold on society. When women take charge of their own pleasure, they take charge of their own life.
Conclusion

As the analyses of these poems demonstrate, Duffy’s *The World’s Wife* is a collection filled with social commentary. This essay focuses on the social commentary found in the poems about real historic wives and about women from Greek mythology who grew tired of being mistreated by men. Duffy’s reimagination of history criticizes, and makes visible, the patriarchal traditions that permeate Western society. By reimagining wives of famous men and known mythological women, Duffy criticizes the historical treatment of women and highlights the lack of women’s narratives. The title *The World’s Wife* insinuates the women of the world are only wives, the passive object attached to a husband, however, Duffy shows that this is not the case. Her poems depict strong women, women who do not adhere to the patriarchal image of what a woman should be or think. Through the use of humor and satire, she manages to create funny but highly critical poems which criticize different aspects of phallocentrism and misogyny.

In the first chapter, wives of famous men are given a voice, and express what they think of their husbands and their work. “Mrs Darwin” ridiculous the grandness of her husband while calling into question the credit that men are given for discoveries. “Frau Freud” speaks to a group of ladies about the fact that penises are not as great as her husband says they are, criticizing Sigmund Freud’s theory of penis envy. “Anne Hathaway” takes a more loving tone, displaying a woman's love for her husband and the loss she feels after he has passed. Duffy also takes a stance on what Shakespeare meant by giving his wife the second best bed, making it an act of love and not an insult. The power of having your own name also becomes clear in these poems, as Mrs Darwin and Frau Freud are known only by their husband's name, while Anne Hathaway keeps her own identity. The first chapter also displays the contrast between a loving and equal relationship (“Anne Hathaway”) and relationships where the
wives become secondary to their husbands (“Mrs Darwin” and “Frau Freud”). Respect and
the keeping of separate identities stand out as the key to equal and loving relationships.

In the second chapter, the mythological woman is reimagined as Duffy takes myths from
Greek mythology and rewrites them from the women’s perspective. The Greek myths are
originally phallocentric as the women mostly appear as villains or side characters, but Duffy
subverts this by giving the women the stage. Circe, who according to the myths turned men
into animals, is given a motive by Duffy as she insinuates that it is done in revenge for being
taken advantage of by men. With “tongue in cheek” (line 12), Circe describes in grizzly detail
how she prepares and cooks the pigs while adding sly critiques of men’s treatment of women.
“Medusa” portrays a woman broken by the mistreatment of her husband as he cheats and
leaves her, and Duffy highlights the misogynistic tropes surrounding women and how they
are more likely to be socially ostracised for men’s actions. By using the theories put forth by
Hélène Cixous in “The Laugh of the Medusa”, I interpret Duffy’s portrayal as intending to
make us look past the misogynistic tropes which surround women, and instead portray them
as complex and three-dimensional people. In the last poem, “Pygmalion’s Bride”, Duffy
criticizes the male fantasy which the story of Pygmalion presents. As the poem is told from
the perspective of the statue, Galatea, it becomes clear that she does not want Pygmalion's
attention or touch. Her first attempt at discouraging him is to stay as a statue, but a passive
object only fuels his desire so she changes “tack” and becomes an active initiator of sex and
desire, which quickly scares him off. Duffy portrays the harm of only being idealized as a
passive object and shows that a change of “tack” can give freedom from patriarchal
idealizations.

The aim was to explore how Duffy critiques patriarchal structures and gender norms by
using reimagination to create alternative history where women are allowed to speak. Duffy’s
poems provide a feminist perspective on these stories, as she gives the women authority over
their own stories and their own actions. To support my readings of the poems I used Cixous as a theoretical stepping board for discussing the importance of writing women into text, and thereby into the world and into history. As she writes women into history and gives them modern feminist ideas Duffy creates a new perspective on history, and as a result a new perspective on the present. The collection is humorous but also serious, wonderful but terrible, and it is the juxtaposition that makes it stand out. As explored in the analysis, the reading suggests a deep criticism of patriarchal and phallocentric traditions and of how they hurt women. Duffy uses reimagining to create an alternative history where the narrative is taken from the men and instead given to the women, creating her-story.

Furthermore, as Duffy wrote poems that represent “men of futile action” and “what men fear”: unleashed, mature, female sexual energy” (Braund, 196), her political agenda becomes clear. The world needs strong women who stand up for themselves, and, as the texts suggest, that involves women not needing men as much as patriarchal norms say they do. “Anne Hathaway” nuances and portrays that equality between partners is possible and the other poems promote agency and the dismissal of patriarchal traditions. The readings of her poems have an impact, and as she was elected the first female Poet Laureate in 2009 her writing was proven to hold political ground. As the first female Poet Laureate, she offers hope of change, both toward inclusivity and equality in the literary canon and toward a larger focus on women poets. The collection *The World’s Wife* challenges and criticizes patriarchal traditions which permeate Western literature, using intertextuality to talk back to the male-dominated canon. Through this reinterpretation, Duffy creates alternative history where women are allowed to break the silence that patriarchal structures have long forced upon them.
Works Cited


