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“I have sung of the women in the shadows”: Rewriting Patriarchal Constructs of Femininity in Carol Ann Duffy’s *The World’s Wife*

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Greco-Roman mythology is the foundation upon which the Western literary canon has been built. Despite their inspirational value, these ancient texts contribute to perpetuating stereotyped notions of gender, sexuality and storytelling. This ongoing influence reinforces patriarchal and misogynistic ideas about (traditionally silenced) women and their role in society. Through centuries, women were usually portrayed to fit the virgin-whore or angel-demon dichotomy, or were directly left out of history, literature and art in general. Nonetheless, and in parallel with the successive waves of feminism, there has been a tendency in contemporary literature, especially represented by female authors, that is defined by the attempt to give back their voice to previously silenced or demonised women.

Hence, the purpose of this dissertation is to analyse a selection of poems from Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife* (1999) in order to show how the Scottish poet provides some widely-known female figures with a voice and an alternative story to that which is part of Western culture. Duffy's collection of poems invites us to be critical of patriarchal constructions of femininity by rewriting womanhood from a feminist perspective, while playing with history, religion, fairy tales and myths as their main intertexts. To narrow the scope of my analysis, I will focus on those poems whose main intertexts are the myths of antiquity. In this way, I will throw light on the prevalence of classical mythology in present-day literature and also, most importantly, on the way in which these stories have shaped the social construction of femininity. Consequently, as will be shown in more detail in the body of the dissertation, femininity can be portrayed differently through rewriting. It is precisely by rewriting mythological women's stories that Duffy can be aligned with what is known as feminist revisionist mythology – "the challenge to and correction of gender stereotypes embodied in myth" (Ostriker 216) – for subverting traditional patriarchal ideology, while creating conscience about gender

as a social construct. Thus, attention is called to the latent victimisation, abuses and oppression suffered by women throughout history, but also to how the conception of femininity has changed through time.

In order to frame the analysis of specific poems, I will begin with an Introduction, where I will give some information about Duffy and her work, about gender as socially constructed, and about the feminist strategy of rewriting. The prevalence of classical myths in literature will also be addressed, as they have helped to create stereotypes about women and have therefore become the target of feminist writers like Duffy. Their task can be understood not only as a challenge for the creative writer but also as a political act and a vindication against the patriarchal construction of femininity. In line with these ideas, other concepts will be introduced in what follows as part of the theoretical framework required for the analysis of a selection of poems in the body of the dissertation. These come from the field of social constructionism, which I will connect with Plato's theory of forms.

I. INTRODUCTION

I.I. The author and her work

Carol Ann Duffy is one of today's most acclaimed British poets. She was born in Glasgow in 1955, although she moved with her family to Stafford, England, when she was a child. She was brought up in a traditional working-class Catholic family. Many of her poems reflect a close familiarity with the practices of Catholicism, which she rejected. She studied Philosophy at Liverpool University from 1974 to 1977. In the 1980s she became a full-time writer, and she has published poetry as well as plays and children's books. In 1966 Duffy moved to Manchester, where she is now a professor of

contemporary poetry and the creative director of the Writing School at Manchester Metropolitan University.

Her first poetry collection, *Standing Female Nude*, was published in 1985 and her reputation as a poet has been rising since then, to the point that she became the first female UK's Poet Laureate, from 2009 to 2019, when she was succeeded by Simon Armitage (Rees-Jones ix–xi). Many poetry collections were published after the above-mentioned *Standing Female Nude: Selling Manhattan* (1987), *The Other Country* (1990), *Mean Time* (1993), *Feminine Gospels* (2002), *Rapture* (2006), *The Bees* (2011), and several others, being *Sincerity* (2018) her latest volume of poetry. It is among these poetry collections that we find *The World's Wife* (1999), which illustrates Duffy's feminist ideology by giving voice to previously silenced women and making their stories known, but in a different version from the one we have heard. Some of these women are "Frau Freud", "Mrs. Midas", "Queen Kong", "Pope Joan", "Medusa", "Anne Hathaway", "Elvis' Twin Sister", etc., the poems' titles pointing to their focus on female figures connected with famous males, but never in the limelight themselves.

Over the years, Duffy has achieved both critical and commercial success. Her poems are ambivalent, since they are both accessible and thought-provoking, clear and complex, humorous and serious. Her poetry is mainly concerned with language and the representation of reality, the construction of the self, gender issues, contemporary culture and different forms of alienation, oppression and social inequality (Bala 4604). Given the focus of this dissertation, though, it is in connection with feminism that the poems to be analysed become more significant.

I.II. Theoretical framework

The development of feminism and the role of female authorship cannot be understood without Simone de Beauvoir. She argued in *The Second Sex*, first published in French in

1949, that in a world where masculinity has an active role, femininity is by default passive, submissive, often invisible and seen as “the other”. As Pam Morris states: “Women have suffered from a long tradition of what is generally called ‘biological essentialism’” (1), thus referring to the idea that men and women are not equal because their biological traits are different, as if biology predetermined their capacities. This argument has been used throughout history to justify women’s subordination (2), but it started to be publicly questioned when women began fighting for their rights. In literature, “many writers started to ‘bear witness’, to use their work deliberately to testify and protest against oppression and suffering inflicted on women” (Morris 62).

Following the lead of feminist revisionist mythology, Duffy uses old myths as main intertexts in some of her poems in order to create new versions of old stories in which female voices are heard and prioritised. Feminist revisionist mythology is a practice whose aim shares in the feminist commitment to revising the Western literary canon, both as a political act and as a way of constructing culture. Writers “simultaneously deconstruct a prior ‘myth’ or ‘story’ and construct a new one which includes, instead of excluding, herself” (Ostriker 212). Thus, its purpose is to recover the voices lost or suppressed through millennia of patriarchy. It attacks the foundation of a canon that has traditionally enforced sexist and patriarchal ideas, and therefore, it asserts the validity of women’s authorship. Duffy’s main intertexts are part of a long cultural tradition that has suppressed women’s voices and, consequently, her work is aimed at reclaiming those voices back.

In this context, the question arises as to why myths are still so conspicuously present in today’s literature. According to Righter, myth is the embodiment of human aspiration and its appropriate imaginative form (3), but also “the bringer of order and form”. Myths provide familiarity, which attracts and involves the European mind, but

they are malleable enough to admit “multiple literary incarnations”. They are not fixed, as they leave room for the imagination to revisit them in different ways (35). Western literature is partly built up upon the order, tradition and ideology of myths. The problem comes when those myths are based on phallocentric and misogynistic conceptions, since then literature is transmitting those ideas and this contributes to maintaining them in society. However, if myth does not find *the* order but *an* order (112), then it can be used as a vehicle for conveying changing views, another order meaningful in our here and now. In turn, the revisions of myths infuse new life in them, for “fictions lose their power when they lose their explanatory force” (Righter 117).

Following Righter’s statement, myths, as order creators, can be said to maintain the gender hierarchy that prevailed in the ancient cultures and that was reflected in them (Doherty 31). The gender distinctions that they were based upon were and are felt long after the dissolution of the Roman Empire, in fact, they were continued by early Christianity, which sometimes even used witchcraft as an excuse to silence women who rejected male authority. American author Max Dashu claims in her book *Witches and Pagans* (2016) that the old words for witches often meant “healer” and “prophetess”. In fact, these women were represented as against God. This was reinforced by the need to change from a polytheistic religion which also worshiped female gods to an institution of male clergymen worshiping a single male God. Thus, voices like Medusa’s or Circe’s were branded as both dangerously powerful and evil.

This is the reason why feminist revisionist mythology has a purpose. Revisionist writers —like Duffy herself, and others like Natalie Haynes, Madeline Miller, and Margaret Atwood— started their “mission” in the 20th century and continue nowadays. This feminist literature fights against the prejudices and damaging stereotypes against women that prevail in our society, and that are related, as second-wave feminists

already contended, to the social construction of gender. As social constructionist scholar Brenda J. Allen points out, “anything that has meaning originates within the matrix of relationships in which we are engaged” (35). Social constructionists assert that humans obtain knowledge of the world “from larger social discourses, which can vary across time and space, and which often represent and reinforce dominant belief systems” (35). They also stress the importance of language in the construction processes, including its ramifications for identity development (May and Mumby 35). Therefore, if, as they claim, humans build the world through social practices that are constructed, maintained, repaired and changed over time, gender ideology and gender inequality are also brought about by social practices that are reinforced by language, all this resulting in “gender order”: the repressive ideology which ensures that deviation from gender norms, either by men or women, entails penalties (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 32). Hence, there is a feminist side to social constructionism in that it fights against disseminated and perpetuated constructed “knowledge” about gender: “This type of knowledge stems more from current connotations about femininity and masculinity (which are social constructions in their own right) than from pre-existing, ‘natural’ characteristics of human beings” (May and Mumby 36).

The contention that “the world *is* [...] as it *appears* to each community” (Hibberd 37) recalls Plato’s theory of ideas, which can be considered as an earlier approach to the issue of the constructed character of our reality. The Greek philosopher made a distinction between the supra-sensible world and the world of sense, which is less real and perfect. It is the former, the suprasensible world, that “alone gives to the world of sense whatever pale reflection of reality may belong to it” (Russell 65). Thus, gender as a social construct would be a distorted reflection of reality, and consequently,

it would belong to the world of sense, not to the world of ideas. Accordingly, these views can be debunked, which is what feminist revisionist mythology does.

This dissertation is going to analyse how Carol Ann Duffy's *The World Wife* (1999) rejects the patriarchal idea of femininity defined in opposition to the ideal of perfection that is masculinity. The poems in this collection, and in particular those chosen as the corpus of my analysis, deal with traditional versions of femininity or womanhood as social constructs that can be explored through myths and that can be rejected, debunked and deconstructed by rewriting, or, in Adrienne Rich's terms, by revisionism. In "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revisionism", Rich argues that the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction, is an act of survival for women: "Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves" (Rich 18). Feminist revisionist mythology is part of this project: whether the goal of feminist mythology revisionists is to break with the past or to harmonise the canon with the current tradition, what is clear is that all of them try to analyse the impact of past stories on modern women and how those stereotypes or notions, specially about gender and gender roles, persist nowadays. In the poems that will be discussed in what follows, all dealing with mythological figures, Duffy can be seen to embrace the project of feminist revisionist mythology and, in this way, she provides literary justice to both the voices that classical mythology distorted or left out and the women rejected by the Western literary canon. In doing so, she also offers a new way of approaching canonical texts, writings and, especially, ideas.

II. DUFFY'S FEMINIST RETELLINGS: MYTHOLOGICAL FEMALE FIGURES IN *THE WORLD'S WIFE*

As has already been pointed out, since Duffy's source materials, and classical myths in particular, often erase women's voices, she focuses on reclaiming them back, thus addressing the significance and power of the female voice. In order to do this, she uses the technique of the dramatic monologue, which makes it possible for each poem's speaker to tell her own story to an addressee or listener. In this way, the characters are presented as actually in control of the narrative. They reclaim their own story by speaking in the first person and, therefore, they force the readers to question the authority of canonical myths, as well as their claim to truth and the moral lessons they impart.

To fully understand the importance of revisionist work, we can just simply reflect on the depiction of women's voices within Greco-Roman mythology. In these ancient stories, female silence and submission are constantly underscored, to the point that the way in which these women use their voices place characters on one or the other side of a strict moral dichotomy. Thus, evil or morally ambiguous females are the only ones with a voice of their own and, what is more, this accounts for their being described as unnaturally loud and dangerously sexual. The most obvious example is that of the sirens, malignant creatures that lure men to their death with their beautiful voices and songs. A further example of this can be seen in the figure of Circe, since in Homer's *Odyssey* she is depicted as a villain whose evil nature is connected in her initial description with her power and her voice. Consequently, the women who do not transgress moral norms are those who stay silent and do not complain, which was considered to fit the "feminine ideal".

Since these myths are widely accepted and absorbed in our culture and society, they transmit this construction of femininity, according to which "women look prettier

when they are quiet" and when they let men control the narrative. Thus, it is necessary to disrupt or debunk the authority of patriarchal discourse. In order to do that, Duffy usually contradicts her source in her poems either by changing the plot of the story or by subverting the value of the male characters or their actions. Hence, the Scottish poet gives us a new perspective and draws attention to the fact that our society knows very little about women in general, that is, except in their relation to men. This is especially noticeable in the poems of the unnamed "Mrs". Therefore, Duffy dismantles the romantic view of the mythological heroes through her protagonists, which allows her to create new views for these stories and for the women who have the leading role in them.

Another interesting aspect of *The World's Wife* has to do with the way in which it highlights the relationships between women, as reflected also by the book's structure. The collection opens with "Little Red Cap", a poem in which a young girl leaves home to follow the lead of an older male poet, whom she then leaves behind, and it closes with "Demeter", in which an older woman welcomes her daughter home. Duffy herself stated "I've ordered the poems so that together they carry a narrative" (23). Accordingly, it can be argued that this collection develops as a woman leaves puberty and enters the life cycle of adulthood. This maturation process can also be appreciated in the speakers' change from prioritizing their relationships with men to valuing other more rewarding ones with women. In fact, many of the speakers make reference to the "girls" they are talking to, emphasizing, once more, the interest of the collection in the relationships between women. Hence, we can assume that the addressees of these poems are mainly women and that the poems themselves "are, ultimately, not meant to tell or dramatise different stories, but to reveal the different subjects' *interiorization* of such stories" (Abad 23). In this way, the traditional gendered dynamics of art are inverted, with poems created and delivered by women, and specifically for female listeners.

II.I. “Penelope” and “Mrs. Icarus”: Questioning the cult of domesticity and the “good wife” stereotype

Up until the Second World War, when they had to step up and work in the factories, women were relegated to the private sphere. They were demoted as “the angel in the house”, a misogynistic understanding that dictated that they had to take care of their home and children while waiting for their husbands to return home after work. Hence, we have the figures of the active working husband who comes and goes and interacts with others, and of the passive waiting wife, the house-bound woman without a life of her own. This distribution of gender roles has a long tradition and is also present in Greek mythology, where the two clearer examples are those of Agamemnon and his wife Clytemnestra in the Kingdom of Mycenae, and Odysseus and Penelope in Ithaca (Clark 47).

In fact, in *The Odyssey* Homer writes that Penelope literally waits twenty years for her husband to return. During that time, she gives birth and raises their son Telemachus, while she tricks all her suitors so as not to marry them, and all by herself reigns in Ithaca while Odysseus is fighting in the Trojan War. However, the image of Penelope that prevails is that of an obedient wife waiting for her husband, *just* faithfully waiting. Here is where Duffy rewrites the myth. At first, in her poem “Penelope” (Duffy, *The World’s Wife*¹ 70–71) she waits impatiently for Odysseus to return: “I looked along the road / hoping to see him saunter home” (1 – 2). However, as time goes by, Penelope grows tired of waiting for someone that never comes back, and so, she picks up work and responsibilities that turn into the new most relevant things in her life. Her knitting work is so important that she becomes more worried about it than about Odysseus’s adventures or return: “Six months of this / and then I noticed that whole

¹ In what follows, the abbreviation *TWW* will be used to refer to this volume, followed by the page number(s) of each of the poems discussed. When lines are quoted from a specific poem, line numbers will be indicated between brackets after the quotation.

days had passed / without my noticing" (6 – 8). In the original myth, this knitting allows her to wait for Odysseus and to not have to marry any of her suitors. However, in Duffy´s poem it is presented as way to preserve her own autonomy. This reading of the myth inspires women to be strong, resourceful and independent.

Another example in *The World´s Wife* of a wife waiting for her husband is that of "Mrs. Icarus" (TWW 54). In this case, her waiting for the husband's return is metaphorical, for Icarus is not away, but still, hubris and pride lead him to prove the world that he is capable of a highly demanding task, while his wife's more sensible opinion is belittled. Mrs. Icarus remarks that she is not the first woman who faces this fate: "I am not the first or the last" (1). What it is relevant in Duffy´s rewriting is that Icarus´s wife effectively knows that he is going to fail and all is probably going to end disastrously. This is indeed what happens, as in the original myth, where Icarus flies too close to the sun and ends up dying. In the poem, Mrs. Icarus speaks about herself and about her experience —shared by other women as pointed out above— and is critical with her husband, whom she mocks. Fed up with him, she shows the world that "he´s a total, utter, absolute, Grade A pillock" (5). This is the last line of the poem, and it represents her utter annoyance at the foolishness of her husband, whom the world considers a genius. Furthermore, her story calls our attention to a tradition in which men do not listen to women, repeatedly regarded as more emotional than intellectual, and so, incapable of logical rigour, which relegates them to the role of mere observers. Mrs. Icarus is an example of how, in myths too, men can be chosen and celebrated, even if they have faults, while women are undermined or directly ignored. Mrs. Icarus represents the women who have judgemental power and opinions, although they are not always heard. By not covering her husband´s faults, she inspires women to be critical and self-confident and to face the future.

It can be argued, in sum, that Duffy subverts the gender construct according to which women are passive beings whose only realm is that of the enclosed domestic space, and who consequently live relegated to the side-lines and just waiting for the man to dictate their lives. Mrs. Icarus shows how women, although not allowed to take action, are able to think for themselves, have their own opinions and disagree with their husbands. In fact, “Penelope”, further ahead into the collection, transgresses these ideas even more radically. She evolves as a woman in the poem, for she goes from a submissive wife to an empowered female who puts her work and interests first and hugely succeeds: “I was picking out / the smile of a woman at the centre / of this world, self-contained, absorbent, content, / most certainly not waiting” (39 – 42). Duffy’s word choice in this quote is relevant, as the lines can be said to summarise the purpose of this poetry collection and of feminist revisionist mythology in general, namely, to give women the place they deserve because of their merits and actions, not because they are/were someone important in the life of a man.

II.II. “Pygmalion’s Bride” and “Eurydice”: A critical take on women as objects of desire/ inspiration in the arts

Another construct of femininity that Duffy debunks and rebels against in this poetry collection is that of the figure of the female muse trapped and positioned as an object by the male gaze. The analysis of the male gaze in connection with gender relations and sexual politics comes from feminist film theory: the concept was introduced by Laura Mulvey to discuss narrative cinema, but it was soon widely adopted by critics and historians from other disciplines. It refers to “the androcentric attitude of an image; that is, its depiction of the world, and in particular of women, in terms of male or masculine interests, emotions, attitudes, or values” (878). Furthermore, “the male gaze” usually designates “the sexually objectifying attitude that a representation takes toward its

feminine subject matter, presenting her as a primarily passive object for heterosexual male erotic gratification” (Eaton 878). Thus, women are reduced to mere idealizations and fantasies. By using “Pygmalion’s Bride” (TWW 51 – 52) and “Eurydice” (TTW 58 – 62) as examples, I will illustrate how Duffy’s poetry collection rejects this male objectification of women in the arts, where they are traditionally depicted as passive subjects, the created work or the inspiration for the artist, but never as the active subject.

In the original myth, as told in Book 10 of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Pygmalion was a sculptor who carved a woman out of ivory. He found women morally defective, and so, he was not interested in them. However, he created a statue that was so beautiful and realistic that he fell in love with it. He wished for Aphrodite’s help, and she granted it, for when he kissed his statue he realised that the ivory had lost its hardness. Finally, they married and even had a son. As a creation of Pygmalion, the statue satisfies his scopophilia and gives him pleasure, but lacks autonomy and does not even have a name. She is silent throughout story, regardless of the fact that she comes to life. She is the perfect woman according to Greco-Roman ideology: beautiful, submissive, faithful, fertile, and most importantly, silent.

In Duffy’s poem “Pygmalion’s Bride” the protagonist is Galatea, the statue that comes to life. She is the one who tells her story, thus breaking her silence. Her disgust contrasts with the traditional version, exclusively focused on the bliss of the artist. Thus, she narrates how Pygmalion kisses her, talks dirty and touches her when she does not want to: “I lay still / as though I’d died” (5 – 6), “His words were terrible” (11), “I didn’t blink” (19), “I didn’t shrink / played statue” (24 – 25). This latter line is most significant as Galatea says that she is not a statue, she “played statue”, she is performing an act. His actions have no consequence because she does not allow him to have any power over her: “he squeezed, he pressed. / I would not bruise” (27 – 28), “His nails

were claws. / I showed no scratch, no scrape, no scar" (31 – 32). And yet, this passive attitude that she has does not chase Pygmalion away, which is what she really wants, so she changes her strategy: "I changed tack, / grew warm, like candle wax, / kissed back" (39 – 41). In this case, the metamorphosis transforms her from a submissive woman into a real and active one who "began to moan, / got hot, got wild, arched, coiled, writhed" (43 – 45). She literally goes from object to subject, which happens not as a result of divine intervention but because of her own decisions. As Jeffrey Wainwright states, "traditionally, the statue grows warm and comes to life and this is Pygmalion's reward for his skill and his pure faithfulness" (Wainwright 51). At the beginning of Duffy's poem, Galatea is subject to her abuser's unwanted touch, but then, although here the statue also grows warm, it is for her own reward, not for her creator's. Hence, Galatea is portrayed as seizing control over her own fate so as to correct the historical imbalance of power.

By moving Galatea from a doll object to a resourceful woman who is also the subject of her narrative, Duffy shows the power that women have. She demonstrates Pygmalion that, even though he has created her, she is the one who holds the reins of her existence, and not him. She does not want to be a man's work or his sexual object, and she embraces life in her own terms, including sex, which she uses as a means to freeing herself. Galatea says that at the climax she "screamed my head off - / all an act" (48 – 49), and thus, the poem ends with Pygmalion leaving: "And haven't seen him since. / Simple as that" (50 – 51). While her playing statue stirred Pygmalion, her being sexually active frightens him. This poem, then, constitutes a "straightforward satire on men who like their women passive but who are terrified when a woman takes the sexual initiative" (Braund 197). So, in the end, Galatea gets what she always wanted: independence, a life of her own.

Much in line with this idea, we find “Eurydice”. It is she that tells the story of how Orpheus, Big O in the poem, descends to the Underworld to rescue her from Hades. She describes the Underworld as a place “Where the words had come to an end” (6) and she is delighted that “It suited me down to the ground” (10). She associates the afterlife with freedom, for she does not have to listen to her husband’s poetry anymore, just as she is no longer defined by it either. In fact, she refuses to be Orpheus’s muse and the Underworld is the first place where she is granted the power of self-expression. As she says to fellow women there: “In fact girls, I’d rather be dead” (45). Duffy retells the story by having Eurydice claim that she actually prefers to be a dead subject in the Underworld than a living object in the hands of her husband.

Being dead allows Eurydice to control the narrative of her life, for there are many words spoken about her, but not quite spoken by her, and this changes in the Underworld: “And given my time all over again / rest assured that I’d rather speak for myself” (42 – 43). Orpheus suffocated her by making her his muse and imprisoning her “in his images, metaphors, similes, / octaves and sextets, quatrains and couplets, / elegies, limericks, villanelles, / histories, myths …” (58 – 61). That is why she wants to stay there, and so, she says: “I did everything in my power / to make him look back” (75 – 76). One of Orpheus’s weakness is his pride or hubris and, intelligently enough, that is what Eurydice resorts to so as to make him turn: “Orpheus, your poem’s a masterpiece. / I’d love to hear it again …” (97 – 98), “he was smiling modestly / when he turned” (99 – 100). What is a tragic outcome in the original myth is most desired by Eurydice in Duffy’s poem. However, she seems to pay a high price to get free from Orpheus. She willingly dies in order to gain freedom, she refuses to go to the world of the living again, and as such, she proves that she can stand for herself, that she has integrity and, most importantly, that she is not a passive object. Her fate and her final remark on “the

drowned silence of the dead” (107) also make us think of all those women who died without being allowed to express themselves through art. For a long time, fame walked by the side of men, sometimes men who did not deserve it, as Duffy’s Orpheus, so full of himself and so lacking in real talent.

Both Duffy’s “Pygmalion’s Bride” and “Eurydice” depict the relationship “artist-muse”, “creator-creation”, emphasizing the patriarchal ideology that prevails in them and that recurrently objectifies women and makes them passive, while men are active and gifted for artistic creation. She subverts this misogynistic construction and gives readers a new view of what can mean to be an idealised muse or the object, never the subject, of art.

II.III. “Medusa” and “Circe”: Revising the patriarchal demonization of female power

The third type of female construct that Duffy subverts is that of the enchantress, the monster and the temptress. These women occupy the negative pole of the moral spectrum. Passive and docile women are idealised, whereas the strong and powerful ones are demonised. In *The World’s Wife* this stereotype is debunked through the figures of Medusa and Circe, two resilient women who have the power to transform the other and are demonised as a result of the threat they represent. Both of them stand for what men fear: “unleashed, mature, female energy” (Wainwright 53).

The poem “Medusa” (TTW 40 – 41) refers to one of the Greek Gorgons. In the original myth, she is a beautiful priestess in one of Athena’s temples. However, she is brutally raped by the god of the sea, Poseidon, and, instead of siding with her, Athena gets enraged, blames and rejects her, and curses her by transforming her beautiful hair into horrible snakes and her love-inspiring gaze into weapons that turn people into stone. Thus, the victim is punished twice, she is rejected and condemned to loneliness,

for she cannot even look at someone without killing him/her. Duffy focuses on her description as a monster and, especially, on why she became a monster.

Medusa's transformation can be seen from the very beginning of the poem: “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” (1 - 5). Hence, the external change comes from her feelings, from her inside, and so, as Wainwright puts it, Duffy's Medusa can be regarded as “another female figure whose power and tragedy are inextricably bound together” (53). The conviction that her husband is being unfaithful, her awareness that she is no longer young and beautiful, and her bad experience of love as suffering cause her to become an ugly monster who, when looked at, turns the other person into stone. Duffy uses this imagery to show the reader how Medusa is trapped by her bad emotions, especially jealously. These feelings turn Medusa's hair into “filthy snakes” (3), a metaphor for unhealthy thoughts. Like “Pygmalion's Bride”, “Medusa” deals with a woman's unhappy and abusive relationship with a man — “And here you come / with a shield for a heart / and a sword for a tongue” (36 – 38)— and the autonomy she needs to reach in order to get free, transforming her suffering into a powerful weapon: “There are bullet tears in my eyes” (10).

She fully changes, and the effects of her monstrosity become clear in an ironic way in the fourth stanza: “I glanced at a buzzing bee, / a dull grey pebble fell / to the ground” (18 – 20). Medusa is the absolute subject of the poem, which highlights not only her voice but, in tune with the intertext, her gaze too. She becomes the observer, the eye, the one who gazes at instead of being gazed, like Galatea or Eurydice. Unlike them, however, this woman's voice is devoid of happiness. At the end of the poem, she states: “I stared in the mirror. / Love gone bad / showed me a Gorgon”; she realises

what she has become and blames her husband for it: “Wasn’t I beautiful? / Wasn’t I fragrant and young? / Look at me now” (40 – 43). The last line has different interpretations: it can be the complaint of a woman that reflects —and asks us to reflect by addressing us— upon what she has lost; but it can also be a threat addressed to her male partner, for if he looks at her, he is going to be turned into stone. Medusa’s jealousy transforms her into a monster but, at the same time, her power makes her acknowledge her feelings and contemplate revenge by turning the man into stone if he looks, or by proving him a coward (unlike the mythical Perseus) if he is afraid of looking.

According to the myth, Circe is another powerful female, in this case, an enchantress and a minor goddess. She was famous due to her vast knowledge of potions and herbs, which she used to transform her enemies into animals. Probably the best-known of her appearances in literature is in *The Odyssey*, as Odysseus visits her on her island, Aeaea, on his way back to Ithaca. The goddess, scheming and wicked, entertains the men hospitably, first flirting and feeding them, singing and encouraging them to forget their wives and homes, and then she transforms them into pigs. However, a more realistic reading could be that she turns the crew into swine because she felt vulnerable and outnumbered. The man-to-pig transformation interestingly resonates with the second-wave feminist cry of “male chauvinist pigs”² (Hodges 20).

In Duffy’s poem “Circe” (TWW 47 – 48), the poetic speaker is presented as teaching the nereids and nymphs how to cook pig, which stands for men in her speech. She is very hard on men in general, perhaps due to her past experiences with them: “When the heart of a pig has hardened, dice it small. / Dice it small. I, too, once knelt on this shining shore / watching the tall ships sail from the burning sun / like myths” (29 –

² Second-wave feminists were the first to use this insult to refer to anti-feminist and sexist men. However, later, being a sexist pig was quickly transformed into a badge of honour worn proudly by misogynists, and, in time, it would come to define a strain of right-wing politics.

32). She has grown up now and we can see the disappointment of a mature woman looking back at her more innocent and vulnerable past self when she says: “Of course, I was younger then. And hoping for men. Now, / let us baste that sizzling pig on the spit once again” (36 – 37). Men are no longer heroes, they are not even desirable or worthy of respect, but they have their uses, in this case, as food. She considers men to be (like) animals.

Circe emerges here as powerful in several ways, for she can do with men whatever she wants, sexually, with her magic, and also, as shown here, with her cooking. That may be the reason why this is a highly sexual poem, with meanings multiplying in most lines to bring together food, men, cooking, eating, and sex: “Remember the skills of the tongue - / to lick, to lap, to loosen, lubricate, to lie / in the soft pouch of the face” (15 – 17). She is completely in control of the situation, and although her attitude and tone may shock the reader to some extent, the poem also provides a different approach to the connection often established in our culture between sexual pleasure and food: it makes us think that women have often been objectified and “consumed” by men like food, and that food has often been feminised as an object of consumption. Duffy’s “Circe” subverts all this and shows us what happens if roles are changed.

Both Duffy’s “Medusa” and “Circe” are depicted as bitter women tired of the suffering that men have caused them. Thus, they decide to take control of their lives and face them, each in their own way, using their own weapons. That is why they are equally terrifying for men, they do not remain silent and uncomplaining, but just the opposite, they rebel and fight for themselves.

III. CONCLUSION

This dissertation has analysed the ways in which the mythological-based poems in Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife* dismantle the gender prejudices and the even sometimes misogynistic notions that Greco-Roman mythology transmits. Embracing the goals and writing strategies of feminist revisionist mythology, Duffy debunks the patriarchal construction of femininity, which I have explored here by focusing on three specific constructs: firstly, the one of the waiting wife, related to the view of females in the domestic realm; secondly, the one of the woman as idealised muse and object of creation in the artistic realm; and thirdly, the one of the powerful woman depicted as malignant and dangerously sexual.

The World's Wife sides with arguments of feminism and social constructionism. It can thus be said, as I hope to have shown through my analysis, to engage with contemporary debates about sexuality, and about the place of women within their relationships and in society. The poems revise the notion of "femininity" and the stereotypes that have been historically transmitted about women and that are far from having been entirely discarded by the individuals and institutions that conform our present-day society.

By using the dramatic monologue technique, Duffy makes women the centre of the collection, restoring their voices and allowing them to tell their own stories in a way that provides an alternative to how these same stories were traditionally told, that is, from a male perspective. I think that the following quotation, taken from Natalie Haynes' novel *A Thousand Ships* (2019), perfectly summarises Duffy's purpose and intentions in writing this poetry collection:

[Calliope] "And I have sung of the women, the women in the shadows. I have sung of the forgotten, the ignored, the untold. I have picked up the old stories and I have shaken them until the hidden women appear in plain sight. I have

celebrated them in song because they have waited long enough. Just as I promised him: this was never the story of one woman, or two. It was the story of all of them. A war does not ignore half the people whose life it touches. So why do we?" (Haynes 339).

The many females in Duffy's poems join their voices to send the same message too. They face us, readers, with what was disregarded and ignored, as Calliope does in the quotation above. Like other feminist revisionists, Duffy is fighting a battle against a venerated tradition of literature that maintained its hegemony and status for too long, making the perpetuation of stereotypes possible in spite of the negative consequences that patriarchal constructs of femininity have upon society, and more specifically upon women. The author takes control of the narrative, stealing the images that would be used against women and subverting them in order to portray these women she writes about, and women in general, as too often misrepresented by myth and by the Western literary canon as a whole. And so, the "women in the shadows" that Duffy brings into the light ask us to question what we were told, to hear what was silenced, and to take that knowledge to our daily lives once the book's last page is turned so that we can work for a future where *all* voices will be heard.

IV. WORKS CITED

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