



GODDESSES, MOTHERS, AND QUEENS

*Critical Perspectives in Carol Ann Duffy's The World's Wife
and Feminine Gospels*

BACHELOR THESIS ENGLISH
LANGUAGE AND CULTURE
23 June 2017

Simone Schoonwater, 5485088
Supervisor: Maria Kager
Second reader: Simon Cook

Content

Abstract	2
Chapter 1: Introduction	3
1.1 Duffy's Realism and Feminism	3
1.2 "Standing Female Nude": An Example of a Critical Perspective	4
1.3 Feminism and Adaptation in <i>The World's Wife</i> and <i>Feminine Gospels</i>	6
1.4 Realism in <i>The World's Wife</i> and <i>Feminine Gospels</i>	7
Chapter 2: <i>The World's Wife</i>	9
Chapter 3: <i>Feminine Gospels</i>	14
3.1 "Work"	15
3.2 "History"	18
Conclusion	21
Works Cited	23

Abstract

Carol Ann Duffy is a Scottish poet who currently serves as the Poet Laureate of the UK. This thesis contains an analysis of Duffy's poetry volumes *The World's Wife* (1999) and *Feminine Gospels* (2001), which are largely fantasy-based works. The study consists of a close reading of three poems: "Mrs Beast" (*The World's Wife*), "Work", and "History" (*Feminine Gospels*). The aim of this thesis is to show how Carol Ann Duffy critically engages with contemporary society even though her poems are set in a different world. The critical perspective she offers as well as the way she presents it will be discussed to enhance the understanding of Duffy's engagement with society.

Introduction

Carol Ann Duffy is a poet and playwright who was born in Glasgow in 1955. On 1 May 2009, she became Poet Laureate of the UK – the first time a woman, a Scot, and an LGBTQ¹ person was rewarded this position. Her poetry has been described as “cheeky” and “subversive” (*The Times*); she has the “ability to pin down a lifetime in half a line” (Mendelson, n.p.). She has published many volumes of poetry, including collections for children. Two of her poetry books for adults are the focus of this thesis: *The World’s Wife* (1999), which rewrites various myths, fairy tales, and histories from a female perspective; and *Feminine Gospels* (2002), which contains some new, women-centred myths that draw on various archetypes and folk-tales. These two volumes are different from Duffy’s usual, realist work, because they focus on the fantastical. However, there is still a sense of realism and critical engagement with society in these poems; the critical point of view that Duffy presents being mainly a feminist one. To show this engagement with society, the (feminist) criticism will be discussed as well as the realist aspects of the texts, which serve to establish a link between the real world and the fantasy world where the stories are set. To do this, a framework of reference needs to be established first with regards to Duffy’s general style and subject, after which characteristics of *The World’s Wife* and *Feminine Gospels* in particular are discussed.

1.1 Duffy’s Realism and Feminism

Duffy’s style can overall best be defined as realist. Reis asserts that Duffy is “continuing a markedly British tradition of social realism” (134) and compares her work to Philip Larkin’s. Larkin is a well-known realist poet and spearhead of the Movement, which advocated “ironic realism” (Harrison 2). Hulse locates Duffy’s work in between this ironic social realism and politically charged poetry (17). However, Duffy’s work differs from Larkin’s in the sense that

¹ LGBTQ stands for: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer.

the Movement was focused on white, middle-class men, whereas contemporary social realism – like Duffy’s – is concerned with class, gender, nationality, sexuality, and race (Gregson 5). In an interview about her poetics, Duffy herself stated realist aspirations for her work: “what I want to do is present [reality], as it is” (Bête Noir 72). Realism is clearly present in her work as Poet Laureate, which consists about writing poetry for specific occasions – like Queen Elizabeth’s Diamond Jubilee – and about British society in general, for a broad audience.

As stated in the previous paragraph, Duffy writes about people who vary greatly in class, gender, nationality, sexuality, and race. She often writes from the perspective of minorities or oppressed groups, who have rarely been given a voice in literature. Reis thus asserts that Duffy creates “a kind of democratic forum for the ‘unrepresented’ and the ‘unvoiced’” in society (136). Specifically, a major focus in her work has been feminism and the representation of women. Her poetry features strong female narrators, is highly critical of the patriarchy and the ways women have been and are still being oppressed, reverses gender roles, and includes a spectrum of sexualities and gender identities. This makes her work distinctly feminist; something which has also been noticed by Braud: she mentions “Duffy’s incontrovertibly feminist agenda” when discussing her work (196).

1.2 “Standing Female Nude”: An Example of a Critical Perspective

Duffy’s realist poems, centred on minorities and oppressed groups, are often critical of contemporary society (an exception are her volumes of love poetry, such as *Rapture*, 2005), where these groups have to deal with racism, sexism, homophobia, and so forth. The poem “Comprehensive” (1985, also published in *Standing Female Nude*, 2001) is an example of this critical perspective. It contains seven short monologues from the perspective of various British teenagers from diverse backgrounds. These monologues expose how prejudices of race and class influence their life and future perspectives, which makes it a rather critical

poem. Another well-known Duffy poem is “Standing Female Nude” from the eponymous volume, which was not written as Poet Laureate but as part of her separate oeuvre. It is a prime example of her realist style and critical message, in this case a feminist one. The poem is written as a dramatic monologue; the speaker is a woman nakedly posing for a painter called Georges. She is a typical Duffy character: she is poor and presumably a prostitute, so she is someone on the edge of society who has rarely been given a voice.

Six hours like this for a few francs.
 Belly nipple arse in the window light,
 he drains the colour from me. Further to the right,
 Madame. And do try to be still.
 I shall be represented analytically and hung
 in great museums. The bourgeoisie will coo
 at such an image of a river-whore. They call it Art.

The speaker satirically sketches a realistic, uncompromising image of her life. She uses straightforward language to describe herself: “Belly, nipple, arse” and says the bourgeoisie see her as a “river-whore”. It is unclear whether she really is a prostitute, but it seems to be implied in the third stanza as well, when the speaker addresses the painter: “Little man, / you’ve not the money for the arts I sell”. She is clearly struggling to make a living, because she is posing for six hours for only a few francs and mentions in the second stanza that “[the artist] is concerned with volume, space. / I with the next meal”. Her life is a paradox: the bourgeoisie will “coo” at her image in a museum, but they do not want anything to do with a river-whore in real life. The phrase “They call it Art” shows that the speaker herself does not necessarily consider her portrait art – she makes a clear distinction between “them” and herself.

A central theme of the poem is the loss of the true identity of the speaker, who is being objectified in the most literal sense of the word. Georges “drains the colour” from her, which implies that he is taking something valuable away from her by painting her, or that it is emotionally draining to pose for him. The speaker feels as if she loses agency over her life – Georges “possesses [her] on canvas”. When she is shown the result, she says: “It does not look like me”. The artist is unable to capture her real essence, or he has changed her so she is pleasing to society. The realistic characterisation and the honest, satirical style of this poem are typical of Duffy’s work, as well as the choice of character and the feminist theme.

1.3 Feminism and Adaptation in *The World’s Wife* and *Feminine Gospels*

When considering *The World’s Wife* and *Feminine Gospels*, these two volumes seem at first far removed from Duffy’s usual poetry, as they employ a fantastical mode of storytelling. However, Duffy still engages critically with contemporary society in them, as she does in most of her other work. The main critical perspective that is presented in both books is mostly a feminist one, although other viewpoints are offered in *Feminine Gospels* as well, such as an environmentalist one. The feminist message has also been noticed by critics: Michaelis and Rowland state that “*The World’s Wife* is certainly committed to feminism” (25), and Rees-Jones argues that the poems in *The World’s Wife* are “probably the most feminist of her oeuvre” (29).

A means to express her feminist message is adaptation, a key element of *The World’s Wife* and to a lesser extent of *Feminine Gospels*. It is exceptionally suited for feminist purposes as it is a means of engaging in a social or cultural critique (Hutcheon 94). The poems in *The World’s Wife* are all adaptations of existing narratives, mainly myths and fairy tales. This practice has been especially popular among feminist writers, as is shown for example by Sellers, who discusses various feminist adaptations by A.S. Byatt, Anne Rice, and

other writers. A.S. Byatt writes a parody of the Medusa story (“Medusa’s Ankles”, published in *The Matisse Stories*, 1991) where Medusa is a female celebrity concerned about her thinning hair. Anne Rice writes *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) from the perspective of the vampire, in a response to Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* where the vampire does not have a voice and is presented as pure evil. Another famous female writer who has adapted classical myths is Margaret Atwood. In *The Penelopiad* (2005) she recounts what Odysseus’ wife Penelope was doing while her husband was away to fight in the Trojan War. Howells has called Atwood’s approach a “domestication of myth” (65), something that is mentioned by Braud when analysing *The World’s Wife*. Braud argues that Duffy gives her myths a sense of the mundane and domestic as well (201). A famous poet who has adapted fairy tales is Anne Sexton: in her book *Transformations* (1971) she rewrites 17 Grimm fairy tales in a raw, harsh way, using dark humour.

Ostriker explains that this feminist interest in fairy tales and myths is because of the authority these narratives already carry in the public sphere which is “unavailable to someone who writes ‘merely’ of the private self” (72). Myths are an important part of the literary canon, and this literary status has often been denied to female writers. Adapting these stories lends a female writer’s work authority, while at the same time allowing her to be critical of the literary canon. Furthermore, myths and fairy tales are prime examples of patriarchal strongholds: the heroes are usually men and the women must either be “sexually wicked”, such as the witch Circe who tries to seduce Odysseus, or “virtuously passive”, such as Helen of Troy (71). Ostriker thus characterises feminist adaptations as “corrections” of the original canonical stories and their gender stereotypes (73). Joosen underlines the importance of feminist fairy tale rewritings in particular, as these tales often serve as a model for children on what behaviour is desirable. It is therefore important that female role models are presented in fiction. Adaptations are also important for an adult audience: “Fairy tale retellings try to make

readers [...] aware of issues and possible interpretations in [the original texts] that they may not have noticed before” (54).

1.5 Realism in *The World's Wife* and *Feminine Gospels*

Many critics have devoted attention to the feminist adaptations in *The World's Wife*. Braud discussed Duffy's work alongside Atwood's novel *The Penelopiad* and Marguerite Yourcenar's prose poem “Clytemnestra, or the Crime” (1935); Wainwright examined the intertext of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in *The World's Wife*; Yorke focused her analysis largely on sexuality in the mythical adaptations; Dowsen looked at the feminist message of the poems in *The World's Wife* and *Feminine Gospels*; and Rees-Jones analysed autobiographical elements in Duffy's poems. However, no extensive argument has yet been made about the presence of realism in *The World's Wife* and *Feminine Gospels*, and neither has this realism been coupled with feminism. Dowsen (*Poet for Our Times* 144) and Rees-Jones (2; 8) characterise *Feminine Gospels* as primarily surrealist, although Rees-Jones admits there is an “impulse of realism” present in the work as well (2). Waugh states that contemporary female writers try to articulate themselves through “the associative and metaphorical modes of fantasy” (171) instead of through realism, and she makes these two mutually exclusive: realism and fantasy cannot both exist in the same work. This thesis argues the opposite: realism and fantasy are both present in *The World's Wife* and *Feminine Gospels*. Carol Ann Duffy uses this realism to make a connection between her fantasy world and contemporary society, which enables her to be critical of said society.

Two devices complement and strengthen Duffy's realism: satire and transposition. The female protagonists tell their stories with a distinct sarcasm. This has also been observed by Michaelis and Rowland, who state that “*The World's Wife* and *Feminine Gospels* are high points of satire in Duffy's oeuvre” (5). The satirical tone adds a sense of realism because it

puts the original stories in a less serious and more down-to-earth perspective. The heroes of myths and fairy tales are shown to be far from infallible and details of their heroic actions are changed, making them less supernatural and more human. In addition, Duffy often transposes the tales to modern times: sometimes fully, such as in “Mrs Faust” (*The World’s Wife*), and sometimes only by adding a few contemporary references, such as in “Eurydice” or “Mrs Beast” (*The World’s Wife*). This establishes another link between fantasy world and contemporary society.

Although Carol Ann Duffy adopts a fantastical mode of storytelling in *The World’s Wife* and *Feminine Gospels*, she still critically engages with contemporary society. The critical viewpoint she carries out in these two works is mainly a feminist one, which is aided by adaptation. The link between the real world and the fantasy worlds Duffy creates and adapts is established by adding realist elements. An analysis of “Mrs Beast” (*The World’s Wife*), “Work” (*Feminine Gospels*), and “History” (*Feminine Gospels*) will focus on the critical message the poem contains, and on how this critical message is linked to contemporary society using realism, in order to prove Duffy’s prevailing critical engagement.

Chapter 2

“Words for the Lost, the Captive Beautiful”: Adaptations in *The World’s Wife*

The World’s Wife was published in 1999 and contains adaptations based on myths, fairy tales, and well-known historical figures. Each poem is centred on one female character that only plays a marginal role or no role at all in the original story; they have all traditionally never been given a voice. Examples of existing characters whose voice Duffy has reimagined include Eurydice, Little Red Cap, and Medusa; other characters she has invented, such as Mrs Teresias, Sisyphus’ wife, Darwin’s wife, Queen Kong, Elvis’ sister, and Mrs Faust. This chapter focuses on “Mrs Beast”, an adaptation of the fairy tale *Beauty and the Beast* by French novelist Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont (1756). This poem is an excellent example of Duffy’s mode of adaptation and it has a broad focus: not only *Beauty and the Beast* is referenced, but many other female characters as well, both fictional and historical. This chapter shows that Duffy engages in a critique of society, by analysing the feminist message of the poem, as well as realist aspects of the text that bridge the gap between the fantasy world and the real world.

“Mrs Beast” is set after the wedding of Beauty and the Beast, which is final scene in the original story. Duffy’s version of Beauty, Mrs Beast, tells the story of her marriage to the Beast, as well as how they first met:

Myself, I came to the House of the Beast
 No longer a girl, knowing my own mind,
 My own gold stashed in the bank,
 My own black horse at the gates
 Ready to carry me off at one wrong word,
 One false move, one dirty look. (72)

This situation is different from the fairy tale, where Beauty goes to the Beast's palace to take her father's place. In the poem, Mrs Beast deliberately comes to the House of the Beast as an independent, self-sufficient woman who has her own money and can leave at any moment. It is not explicitly stated why she comes to the House of the Beast. Perhaps she wants to marry, but wants to prevent a relationship where she is dominated by her husband, or where he takes her presence for granted. The Beast seems a suitable marriage candidate because he worships her:

[...] the Beast fell to his knees at the door
 To kiss my glove with his mongrel lips – good –
 Showed by the tears in his bloodshot eyes
 That he knew he was blessed – better. (72)

The Beast attends to her every whim, similar to the Beast in the fairy tale, although an explicit sexual element is added in the poem: Mrs Beast tells him exactly how she wants to be pleased. He also performs traditionally female tasks, such as washing the sheets: “If his snout and trotters fouled / my damask sheets, why, then, he'd wash them. Twice” (73). The Beast does not transform back into a prince in Duffy's version and his wife seems perfectly content with that, as she states: “they're bastards when they're princes. / What you want to do is find yourself a Beast” (72), because a prince will only “dump [you] in the end”. The transposition in this poem is limited to a few modern elements: Mrs Beast drinks a bottle of “Château Margaux '54, / the year of my birth” and mentions contemporary celebrities like Princess Diana and Bessie Smith.

“Mrs Beast” is written in the form of a dramatic monologue with the wife of the Beast as the speaker. Dowsen notes that “the dramatic monologue puts the male gaze and the male voice, emblems of constructed masculinity, under scrutiny” (*Older Sisters* 16). This is exactly what Duffy does: instead of a male gaze, a female gaze is presented. Mrs Beast tells us about

“[the Beast’s] erection, / size of a mule’s – best” and that “stripped of his muslin shirt / and his corduroys, he steamed in his pelt, / ugly as sin” (73). Where men have traditionally been using women for sex, in Duffy’s poem it is the other way around. Mrs Beast calls for her husband whenever *she* wants: “Bring me the Beast for the night” (75). While the Beast adores her – “he knew he was blessed” (72) – Mrs Beast states: “Let the less-loving one be me” (75). The voice of Mrs Beast is also clearly satirical: “The pig in my bed / was *invited*” (73), and she often uses colloquial, straight-forward language to address her audience: “look, love, I should know, / they’re bastards when they’re Princes”; “a Prince, a pretty boy” (72); “the drop-dead gorgeous bride of the Bearded Lesbian”; “a head-to-head between Frau Yellow Dwarf and Bearded’s Bride / was over the biggest pot I’d seen in my puff” (74).

However, “Mrs Beast” is not simply an adaptation of *Beauty and the Beast*. It incorporates more famous female characters, such as the Little Mermaid, Cleopatra, and Marilyn Monroe. This allows Duffy to provide a broader critical perspective on fairy tales, both fictional and historical, and transform them into more realistic stories. The first two lines of the poem immediately set the tone: “These myths going around, these legends, fairy tales / I’ll put them straight” (72). In Duffy’s universe, perfect happy endings do not exist. There seem to be two options: if a woman is tough and independent, she can make a decent life for herself; if she makes the mistake of giving up her whole life to marry a pretty, charming prince, she will end up dead. This is what happens to the Little Mermaid, who:

[...] slit
 Her shining, silver tail in two, rubbed salt
 Into that stinking wound, got up and walked
 In agony, in fishnet tights, stood up and smiled, waltzed,
 All for a Prince, a pretty boy, a charming one,
 Who’d dump her in the end, chuck her, throw her overboard. (72)

The realistic and explicit description of the Little Mermaid mutilating herself for a man is a powerful part of Duffy's feminist message.

Mrs Beast and her companions, who include the Woman Who Married a Minotaur, Goldilocks, the Bride of the Bearded Lesbian, and Frau Yellow Dwarf, are examples of successful women: "all of us beautiful and rich" (73). They are described as a "hard school, tough as fuck" – and they need to be, considering their unconventional choice of partner (although Goldilocks does not marry in her fairy tale, but she is fearless enough to steal food from bears). The group of women regularly play poker together; on these nights, "the Beast kept out of sight". This once again marks a reversal of gender roles: traditionally, it would be the husband having the poker nights with his friends while his wife kept her distance. The game, appropriately enough, is won with the Queen of Clubs and the Queen of Spades.

The poker game is used as a metaphor for the agency that Mrs Beast and her friends have, but the women in traditional stories lack:

But behind each player stood a line of ghosts
unable to win. Eve. Ashputtel. Marilyn Monroe.
Rapunzel slashing wildly at her hair.
Bessie Smith unloved and down and out. (74)

As the use of "a line" indicates, there are many more women who met an unhappy end and plenty of examples are given. The Little Mermaid is abandoned and thrown overboard by her prince; the fates of Ashputtel (Cinderella's original name), Snow White, and Rapunzel are not recounted in detail, but it is made clear they are all dead because they are described as part of the ghosts who were unable to win. Historical figures like Marilyn Monroe, Bessie Smith, the wives of Henry VIII and Bluebeard, and Princess Diana are also mentioned, all of whom met tragic and premature ends. Princess Diana and Bessie Smith died in car crashes while their lovers were driving; Marilyn Monroe overdosed on drugs; and Henry VIII and

Bluebeard murdered their wives. Mrs Beast and her friends are aware of the faith of these women and make a toast in their name. The quote “Bad girls. Serious ladies. Mourning our dead” (74) shows that the poker players feel connected to the dead women and count them amongst their own. When Mrs Beast is standing alone on her balcony after the game, she even prays for them, “the lost, the captive beautiful, the wives, those less fortunate than we” (75). The Beast has been “[turfed] out of bed”; this moment of introspection and mourning is one where men are unwanted.

Chapter 3

“Long Live the Queen”: Female Myths in *Feminine Gospels*

Feminine Gospels was published in 2002, the next volume of poetry Duffy wrote after *The World's Wife*. It is similar to its predecessor in certain aspects: it contains references to myths and other well-known characters as well, although the poems are not adaptations. The poem “Beautiful”, for example, incorporates the stories of Helen of Troy and Cleopatra and places them side by side with the lives of Marilyn Monroe and Princess Diana to show the toll that beauty and fame take. On the other hand, “The Laughter of Stafford Girls’ High” is mostly a realistic poem about contemporary life, except for the strange giggling disease that strikes the high school where the poem is set. However, Duffy mostly writes about women who personify aspects of (female) life. “The Long Queen” is the goddess of the female lifespan, from childhood to childbirth. She lives alone on a deserted island and has married Time to become immortal. In “The Woman Who Shopped”, a woman who is addicted to shopping turns into a department store – a metaphor for how shopping has taken over her whole life. The fantastical element is thus still clearly present in this volume.

Because *Feminine Gospels* is more diverse than *The World's Wife* in terms of subject matter and approach, two poems are discussed in this chapter to give a better overview of the volume. “Work” and “History” are not adaptations; instead, personification is a key element of these poems. The critical perspective Duffy offers in these poems is not just a feminist one, but also concerns the environment and history. The analysis of this chapter will focus on this, as well as the realist aspects of the text.

3.1 “Work”

“Work” presents an allegory of Mother Earth, who is literally a working, single mother in this poem. It starts out on a small scale, when the mother only has one child:

To feed one, she worked from home,
 took in washing, ironing, sewing.
 One small mouth, a soup-filled spoon,
 life was a dream. (21)

Duffy describes a stage of domestic bliss here, where the mother has just given birth to her first child and can easily provide for it by doing light work from home. However, as the poem progresses, her offspring multiplies rapidly: one child becomes two, two becomes ten, ten becomes fifty, until there are thousands of them. The mother needs to work harder and harder to feed all her children. In the final stanza, her efforts have grown so big that she has become the earth: “She fed / the world, wept rain, scattered the teeth in her head / for grain, swam her tongue in the river to spawn” (22). The poem also incorporates mankind’s technological and industrial developments: in the second stanza, the mother still works on the land; by the fourth stanza the Industrial Revolution has taken place and she works in a factory; in the seventh stanza, TV and Internet have taken over. These developments, however, are not necessarily presented as progress, but more as desperate measures taken to sustain the ever-growing human population. The mother is dehumanised in the process.

This poem is an example of how Duffy combines myth and realism. On the one hand, she presents the reader with an allegory of Mother Earth, a figure present in countless folk-tales, myths and pagan religions; on the other hand, she gives a voice to the hard-working single mother who is trying to provide for her children. The allegory and the realistic portrait reinforce each other: the use of Mother Earth allows Duffy to enlarge and dramatize the day-to-day struggles of a human mother. Her life is not easy, which is conveyed by the varied use of verbs, like “she *toiled*, *sweated*, went / on the night shift, *schlepped*” and “to feed four, / she *grafted* harder, second job in the alehouse” (21, italics mine); “there was no stopping her. She *slogged* / day and night at Internet shopping” (22, italics mine).

Duffy presents a feminist perspective because she gives a voice to working mother. A father figure is not mentioned; instead, the mother is given both traditionally female and male tasks. She “took in washing, ironing, sewing” but she also “worked outside, sewed seeds, watered, / threshed, scythed” and

[she] was factory gates
 at first light, oil, metal, noise, machines.
 To feed fifty, she toiled, sweated, went
 on the night shift, schlepped, lifted. (21)

It is shown that the mother is capable of performing all of these tasks, regardless of the gender they are usually associated with.

However, the main critical point of view that is presented is an environmentalist one. By gradually making the single mother a personification of the earth, Duffy is able to criticise the way contemporary society handles natural resources. The population growth in the poem increases exponentially and is made urgent:

cities grew,
 her brood *doubled*, peopled skyscrapers,
trebled. To feed *more, more*
 she dug underground, tunnelled,
 laid down the track, drove trains. *Quadruple* came,
multiplied, she built planes, outflew sound.
Mother to millions now (21-22, italics mine)

The demands of this population increase even harder than its size, and it is not just about food anymore: skyscrapers, planes, and trains are built; TVs, PCs, and the Internet invented. The final two stanzas show the painful toll this takes on Mother Earth: to feed the world population, she “trawled the seas, hoovered fish, felled trees, / grazed beef, sold cheap fast

food, put in / a 90-hour work week” (22). All her efforts are a temporary solution, as they only allow her offspring to swell again: she feeds “more, more” but it leads to a population that multiplies. In the end, it causes the mother’s own demise: she “sickened, died, lay in a grave”. She has literally “worked, to the bone, / her fingers twenty-four seven”. The message is clear: humans are wearing out the earth, essentially killing their own mother. By making the earth an actual person (the working mother), Duffy invokes more sympathy in her readers for the dying earth. This shows how realism and fantasy combine to offer a critical perspective of contemporary society.

3.2 “History”

“History” is similar to “Work” in terms of content: this time, the main character of the poem is an old, sick woman, and the thing that is personified is not the earth, but history. History is described as

bones in a bed, not a tooth
 in her head, half dead, shuffled
 and limped downstairs
 in the rag of her nightdress,
 smelling of pee. (28)

She is alone in her house and although she puts on a coat, she only uses it to sleep in – she does not go anywhere. Duffy’s analogies are concise and vivid: the reader can imagine the earth as a hard-working mother and history as an old, tired and lonely woman who has seen too much. The realist aspect of this poem manifests itself in the mundane details: History smells of pee, drinks tea, and snores. This transforms History from an abstract concept into a living, breathing person, which ensures that the reader can sympathise with her.

Duffy uses “History” to criticise the attitude people have towards history. In the first line, History wakes up: “She woke up old at last, alone” (28), and she wakes up again at the end of the sixth stanza: “She woke again, / cold, in the dark, / in the empty house” (29). This pattern of sleeping and waking shows how history is a cycle that repeats itself. More support for this cyclicity is found in the fifth stanza, which mentions several wars from different eras in one breath. By summing them up like this, Duffy shows that all wars are essentially the same:

[She] witnessed the wars,
 the bloody crusades, knew them by date
 and by name, Bannockburn, Passchendaele,
 Babi Yar, Vietnam. (29)

Various other historical events are also mentioned: the fall of Rome, Hitler’s dictatorship, the rise of Christianity. However, all these appear in History’s dreams. This can be seen as a metaphor: humans tend to regard the past as a bad dream and they do not learn from it: after all, history repeats itself all the time, Duffy implies. The message of negligence is enforced in the seventh stanza:

Bricks through the window now, thieves
 in the night. When they rang on her bell
 there was nobody there; fresh graffiti sprayed
 on her door, shit wrapped in a newspaper posted
 onto her floor. (29)

The fact that History’s house is being vandalised might suggest that humans do not take history seriously and have little respect for it.

Because Duffy’s history is a woman, this neglect and disrespect can also specifically refer to the treatment of women in history. Since the 1970s the concept of Herstory – as a

contrast to history as his story – has been used to refer to history that is centred around the role of women. Several books have been published on this topic, such as *Herstory: Women who Changed the World* by Deborah Ohrn and Gloria Steinem. In line with this movement, the fact that Duffy has made History a woman draws attention to the representation of women in history. Where the earth has been characterised as female (a mother) throughout the ages, history has predominantly been written by men, about men. This is shown in the poem as well: the only woman who appears in the dreams of the female History is the Virgin Mary. In contrast, many men are mentioned in her dreams: Jesus and his apostles, the emperors of Rome, and Hitler for example. The representation – or rather, lack thereof – of women in history is an important feminist issue that is implicitly addressed in this poem.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

Myths and fairy tales are universal stories which are concerned with human nature: there is often a lesson in morals to be learnt, for example about the values of honesty and hard work, and the dangers of pride and deceit. Take Icarus, who was careless and flew too close to the sun, resulting the melting of his wings and his death; or Ashputtel's stepsisters who cut off their toes to try fit the glass shoe, but still did not marry the prince. Duffy takes these stories, but instead of focusing on human individuals, she presents a critical view of society as a whole and of the narratives themselves.

“Mrs Beast”, “Work”, and “History” show the same engagement with society that marks most of Duffy's poetry, whether it's related to feminism, environmentalism, or something else. The realism Duffy maintains in her fantastical narratives facilitates her criticism: it bridges the gap between contemporary society and the worlds where magic exists, where women marry beasts and history can walk and talk like a regular human being. The realism manifests itself in various ways: the omission of happy endings and infallible heroes, the mundane details – which were observed by Braud as well (201) – the straight-forward, sometimes colloquial language, and the realistic characterisation.

When comparing the three poems to each other and to “Standing Female Nude”, it is striking how similar they are in style, even though their subject matter and mode of storytelling is quite different. Duffy confronts reality in her own typical way: direct and honest, yet with sensitivity and an eye for details. Although most of the poems in *The World's Wife* (like “Mrs Beast”) and quite a few in *Feminine Gospels* are satirical, Duffy does not need this to make her point: “Work” and “History” are not satirical at all, but they are still critical.

Realism and fantasy complement each other in Duffy's work. The mythical approach provides a sense of universality to the critical message of the poems that might not have been

present without it; vice versa, the realism anchors the fantastical stories to the real world that allows Duffy to engage with society more easily.

Works Cited

- Braud, Susanna. “‘We’re Here Too, the Ones without Names’: A Study of Female Voices as Imagined by Margaret Atwood, Carol Ann Duffy, and Marguerite Yourcenar.” *Classical Reception Journal* 4.2 (2012): 190-208.
- Byatt, A.S. *The Matisse Stories*. New York: Vintage, 1996.
- Dowsen, Jane. *Carol Ann Duffy: Poet for Our Times*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- . “‘Older Sisters Are Very Sobering Things’: Contemporary Women Poets and the Female Affiliation Complex.” *Feminist Review* 62.2 (1999): 6-20.
- Duffy, Carol Ann. “Interview”. *Bête Noire*. Winter (1988): 69-78.
- . *The World’s Wife*. London: Picador, 2000.
- . *Standing Female Nude*. Manchester: Anvil Press Poetry, 2001.
- . *Feminine Gospels*. London: Picador, 2003.
- Gregson, Ian. “Carol Ann Duffy: Monologue as Dialogue.” *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism*. London: Macmillan, 1996. 97-107.
- Harrison, S.J. “Introduction: The Return of the Classics.” *Living Classics: Greece and Rome in Contemporary Poetry in English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. 1-18.
- Howells, C.A. “‘We Can’t Help but Be Modern’: The Penelopiad.” Ed. S.A. Appleton. *Once upon a Time: Myth, Fairy Tales and Legends in Margaret Atwood’s Writings*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2008. 57–72.
- Hulse, Michael, David Kennedy and David Morley. Eds. *The New Poetry*. Hexham: Bloodaxe Books, 1993.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation*. 2nd ed. Oxon: Routledge, 2013.
- Joosen, Vanessa. *Critical and Creative Perspectives on Fairy Tales: An Intertextual Dialogue between Fairy-Tale Scholarship and Postmodern Retellings*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011.

- Mendelson, Charlotte. "The Gospel Truth." *The Guardian*. The Guardian, 13 Oct. 2002.
- Michaelis, Angelica and Antony Rowland. *Choosing Tough Words: The Poetry of Carol Ann Duffy*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003.
- Ostriker, Alicia. "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking." *Signs* 8.1 (1982): 68-90.
- Rees-Jones, Deryn. *Carol Ann Duffy*. 3rd ed. Devon: Northcote House Publishers, 2010.
- Reis, Huriye. "'Presenting It, as It Is': Poetics of Realism and Politics of Representation in Carol Ann Duffy's Poetry." *Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 21.2 (2004): 133-142.
- Rice, Anne. *Interview with the Vampire*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1976.
- Sellers, Susan. *Myth and Fairy tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.
- Waugh, Patricia. *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern*. London: Routledge, 1989.
- Wainwright, Jeffrey. "Female Metamorphoses: Carol Ann Duffy's *Ovid*." *Choosing Tough Words: The Poetry of Carol Ann Duffy*. Eds. Angelica Michaelis, Antony Rowland. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003. 47-55.
- Yourcenar, Marguerite. "Clytemnestra, or the Crime". *Fires*. Trans. Dori Katz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.