

## REVISIONING THE MARGINS: A CRITIQUE OF THE SELECT POEMS OF CAROL ANN DUFFY

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### Abstract

Carol Ann Duffy, the most celebrated Scottish poet and playwright, has been Britain's Poet Laureate since the year 2009. Duffy's most challenging and extraordinary genius is evident in the 1999 poetry collection *World's Wife*, a collection of thirty poems based on mythology where Duffy makes a shift in focus by selecting women behind the mythological heroes as central characters.

This paper centers on the shift in focus used in the poems of the collection which can be understood as a strategy of feminist revisionist mythology, that points out to the rediscovery of old texts through a female perspective. Provisioning mythologies prove as a perfect medium to speak out to the world about the oppression faced by women throughout the centuries as mythologies are something that is heard since time immemorial and has the capacity to reach out to a wider audience. Inculcating the stories from mythologies helped Duffy to rewrite what has written about women in history and also to win a space in it for women to relate their own stories.

**Keywords:** Revisioning mythology, rewriting history, restructuring old stories, male gaze, and ideology.

Carol Ann Duffy, the most celebrated Scottish poet and playwright, has been Britain's Poet Laureate since the year 2009, and is the first woman, the first Scott, and the first openly LGBT person to hold the position. She was an avid reader from an early age and always dreamt of becoming a writer and started producing her literary outputs from the age of 11. Her poetry collections include *Standing Female Nude* (1985); *Selling Manhattan* (1987); *Mean Time* (1993); and *Rapture* (2005) which won her the T. S. Eliot Prize. She attained fame in the UK poetry circles with the publication of her poem "Whoever She Was" which won the Poetry Society National Poetry Competition in 1983. Duffy's most challenging and extraordinary genius is evident in the 1999 poetry collection *The World's Wife*, a collection of thirty poems based on mythology, where Duffy makes a shift in focus by selecting women behind the mythological heroes as central characters.

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In *The World's Wife* Duffy assumes imaginary wife characters to the heroes in mythology including King Herod, Midas, Tiresias and other glorious figures. The shift in focus used in the poems of this collection can be read as a strategy of feminist revisionist mythology, which mainly points out rediscovery of old texts through a female perspective. Employing such a technique to revision mythology can be viewed as the child of Duffy's genius. Duffy is best known for her trait to work on old stories and tales and to reconstruct them into her own. "What you can do as a poet is take on a story and make it new", (telegraph.co.uk/culture/books) she once commented in an interview, which she made exceptionally evident and effective in her poem "Little Red Cap" which is a great model of her style of poetry in the collection.

Mythologies can be considered as best part of histories. Thus, while tracing down history it is evident, from every nook and corner, that history or most importantly mythologies always celebrated men and their struggle to make a better tomorrow. Sometimes it goes to an extent where one doubts whether there were no women in the past. This is the point from where Carol Ann Duffy makes her move through her most famous poetry collection *The World's Wife*. Duffy uses women characters as her mouthpiece to speak out to the world. She presents stories, myths and fairy tales from mythology in order to breathe life into her work of art. Mythologies rarely present the excellence of women, but Duffy in all these poems speaks from the feminine point of view by making the wife characters express their views, for instance in poems like "Eurydice", "Mrs Faust" and "Mrs Icarus". The eponymous titles, "Eurydice", "Mrs Faust", "Mrs Darwin", "Mrs Icarus", "Mrs Midas", themselves serve an apt beginning for the scheme the poetess has adopted for her way of telling the other sides of the myths. Duffy makes it a point that women, for centuries, were considered inferior to men or were considered as weak and incapable of making great steps forward. Duffy has chosen tales from mythologies to portray how severely women were discriminated even in those great works of art, to what extent they were distanced from voicing their psyche and to give a whole new dimension of looking into the same age old stories which always influenced the way of perceiving reality to generations. It helps in the upliftment of women and proves that women also can contribute to a better future and can leave indelible marks in the golden pages of history.

Charles Darwin, the famous English naturalist who laid the foundational concept of science, proved that all species of life have descended from a common ancestor, but Duffy has a different story about Darwin's discoveries. In the poem "Mrs Darwin" Duffy makes a fact known to the world and she weaves it dexterously in a single stanza. The poet says that on 7 April 1852, when Darwin and his wife went to a zoo, she told him, "something about that Chimpanzee over there remind me of you" (4). Duffy left her trait most evident in this line as she explains that Darwin got the idea of evolution of species from his wife's words and the discovery that altered the basic foundation of science sprouted up from the thought process of a woman. But all the appreciation and credit for the discovery went to Darwin and

till date it is called as the “Charles Darwin invention”. Duffy here tries to show that the world has never heard about women who have stood behind successful men, for no one acknowledges their part anywhere. This again counts for the label given to them as the weak and fragile beings incapable of any contribution to mankind.

The story of Faust, a corrupt and greedy man who sells his soul to the devil, is well-known and gained much more popularity through Christopher Marlowe’s sixteenth century play *Doctor Faustus*. Duffy’s version of the Faust legend is of an unlikely married couple in a materialistic and capitalistic world who chase luxury and forget to live their life, which is obvious from the lines in the poem:

I grew to love lifestyle,  
not the life.  
He grew to love the kudos,  
not the wife. (19-22)

Duffy, in the poem, assumes a wife to Faust who is as unappealing and covetous as her husband; both of them lived up to satisfy their own materialistic greed; they were just two people living in the same building in their own weird ways. As for her, she says: “I went my own sweet way/ saw Rome in a day/ spun Gold from hay/ had a facelift/ had breast enlarged/ my buttocks tightened” (72-77). Duffy reworks the legend of Faust in this poem by giving it her own unique twist. The poet empowers Mrs Faust with a great secret, may be in order to cope with her husband who commits Mephistophelean acts throughout his lifetime. The greedy man who sold his soul to Mephistopheles did not have a soul, which is revealed through Mrs Faust’s words, “I keep Faust’s secret still –/ the clever, cunning, callous bastard/ didn’t have a soul to sell” (131-133). Duffy elucidates that a woman is powerful enough to support a legendary man and to keep his secret from the world as long as she is alive which makes him a legend of all time. She points out that Faust was a greedy man who lacked even a soul, bringing to light the fact, how miserable it was for Mrs Faust to share her life with such an impish being.

In the poem “Eurydice” Duffy celebrates the tale of Orpheus, the great musician whose music lures even the lifeless stone, “even the mute, sullen stones at his feet/ wept wee, silver tears” (43-44), and his wife Eurydice. In the traditional tale, Eurydice dies from a snake bite and is taken to Hades, the Underworld. Orpheus persuades the Gods to return Eurydice to him and they agreed on the condition that he should not look back and should walk in front of Eurydice in their journey back to earth. Unfortunately Orpheus could not resist his temptation and he looks back at his wife, thus lost her forever. In Duffy’s poem “Eurydice” the poet remoulds the traditional tale of Orpheus, by making Eurydice speak about her plight to follow her husband back to earth. Eurydice says that she was happy in Hades and she did her best to make her husband turn back and look at her by speaking the words: “My voice shook when I spoke –/ Orpheus, your poem’s a masterpiece./ I’d love to hear it again . . .” (102-104) and thus bidding farewell to her husband forever. Duffy also subverts the idea in the myth that Eurydice is the passive woman simply happy to be the object of a man’s desire and whim.

Eurydice in the poem, unlike the one in mythology, is courageous enough to take decision about her life that she no longer wishes to get trapped in Orpheus'

. . . images, metaphors, similes,  
 octaves and sestets, quatrains and couplets,  
 elegies, limericks, villanelles,  
 histories, myths . . . . (63-66)

Orpheus considered his wife as merely an object to satisfy his needs or more precisely to celebrate his poetry by making her a subject and assuming her as "His Muse" (22) and thus raising his level as the most brilliant one, "the Big O./ larger than life." (30-31).

Duffy's portrayal of a different story through the poem "Eurydice" projects how women were treated so unfairly that they had to blindly follow what men decide. This shows the extreme effect of the patriarchal order that haunted women even after death. Duffy shapes the character of Eurydice and makes her express herself in order to provide a larger view on the depth of male gaze and the way a woman's likes and dislikes are concealed for the sake of a man's wishes.

The tale of Icarus, the son of the skillful master craftsman Daedalus of Greek mythology, also finds a perfect space in the artistic excellence of Carol Ann Duffy, in her poem "Mrs Icarus". Duffy assumes a wife to Icarus who becomes Duffy's mouthpiece in the poem. Duffy makes his wife speak out to the world that "I am not the first or the last" (1), to face this fate. She talks about her husband's pride which welcomed his downfall. Icarus is known to the world as the person who defied his father Daedalus' words by flying near to the sun with his waxen wings, thus plunging to his death into the Aegean Sea. In the poem, Mrs Icarus speaks about herself, that she is not the first and the last woman to talk about one's husband and to prove to the world that "he's a total, utter, absolute, Grade A pillock" (5). This is the very last line which portrays a wife's complete annoyance about the utter foolishness committed by her husband, whom the world considers to be a genius. Duffy purposefully creates the wife character in order to scream out to the world about the foolishness committed by a man, as the mythologies always celebrated men and undermined women. Mrs Icarus represents the whole community of women that they too have a judgemental power and opinion of their own. By unwilling to conceal her husband's faults, she inspires the entire race of women to stand strong and face the future.

Carol Ann Duffy through her poetry collection *The World's Wife*, brings a stride forward towards the new century's need to uplift the marginalized. Duffy could have chosen any subject matter in order to present the subjugation of women, but she stucked on to mythology. The most important reason for this decision might be the popularity of mythology and how these mythologies affect a human being's perception of reality from a very young age. They are the first medium through which children get to know of the world around them and how that system works and influences their sensibility. By making changes to such influential but biased stories, Duffy tries to rectify a severe mistake in the way history is

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written through these stories and builds up a new world including the voices of the marginalised, being more democratic. Being a woman of letters, Duffy has done the best that she can ever do with her pen through *The World's Wife* in order to strengthen the status of women in this century.

Mythologies tend to disseminate ideologies which can be traced down to Louis Althusser's famous statement ideology is indispensable in any society if men are to be formed, transformed and equipped to respond to the demands of their conditions of existence. His essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" referred to the two major ways to inculcate values or ideologies into a social system, through Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). RSA functions through physical violence, but ISA functions mainly in a psychosocial manner as they aim to inculcate values in the ways of perception among the people, about how they see, think, and work in a social situation. Duffy has deliberately selected mythology to revise for she knew the impact it can bring over people. As per Althusser's theory mythology is one among the tools with which an ideology is being indirectly penetrated to the individuals of a society. Revisioning such a tool with the demand of the present age helps in resolving errors of the existing system, as Duffy's lines endorse, in the oppression of the dominating patriarchal order. Duffy not only rewrites what has written about women in history but also wins space in it for women to tell their own stories.

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