

Female Sexuality, Desire and Writing as Reflected in the Poetry of Carol Ann Duffy

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Abstract

This study attempts to explore the heterogeneity of desires and sexualities as reflected in Carol Ann Duffy's poetry. I show (a) how she simultaneously depicts both lesbian and heterosexual desires and (b) also addresses their problematic aspects. I argue that (c) female subjectivities are constructed both through wives' monologues about their male partners as in heterosexual marriages and through men's reflection upon women in male-voiced monologues as well. But I also (d) examine poems where the expression of desire in language and—not the sexed subjects—is her principal aim. Yet in the light of my previous exposition on female subjectivities, I refuse to reduce her various sexual positions to mere linguistic constructs. Finally I demonstrate (e) how her equal employment of 'soft' and 'tough' words veers from any systematic development of a pure 'common' female language.

Keywords: Carol Ann Duffy, Sexualities, Lesbian Poetry, Female Subjectivities, Writing of Desire

Introduction

The most important theme in Duffy's poetry to have received academic attention recently is her treatment of sexuality and desire and the relation they bear to her practice of writing. Both issues feature prominently throughout all her volumes albeit revealing a number of dimensions. Whereas the earlier volumes like *Selling Manhattan* (1987) and *Mean Time* (1993) contain several powerful monologues where men reflect upon their relationships with—or desire for—women, the massively popular *The World's Wife* (1999) is devoutly attentive to women's desire, dissatisfaction, anger resulting from their frustrated partnership with men. This acerbic feminist voice is softened and, as we will see, depersonalized in the stunning love-lyrics of *Rapture* (2005) and in some poems of *The Bees* (2011). As the poetic emphasis shifts from articulation of certain specific sexuality to that of desires which are mostly disembodied and free-floating I devote the concluding part of the first section to the analysis of how desire is written or inscribed. Yet towards the end of the article, I do propose a way to conceptualize desire in terms of the sexual positions I identify in the first section i.e. *not without* its political implication. Following I first categorize her poems as per their representation of lesbian and heterosexual desires and the attendant formulation of female subjectivities. In the second section, I explore the relation between language/writing and desire and further examine the possibility of development in Duffy's poetry of a uniquely feminine language that supposedly embodies the female subjectivity.

I

Duffy's poetry features a wide range of female desires and their related emotions. Imagination and portrayal of desires undergo changes throughout her career of writing. She powerfully represents both lesbian and straight relations. To begin with, lesbianism is represented in a number of ways, both implicitly and explicitly, but in her earlier collections, without ever missing the subversive potential that undercuts such forms of female mutuality.

Thus, in ‘Oppenheim’s Cup and Saucer’ two women ‘stir’ themselves ‘far from the laughter of men’, by drinking ‘the sweet hot liquid’ and talking ‘dirty’ and by undressing (Collected Poems, henceforth CP, 48). In line with Paul Verlaine’s homoerotic poems, her poem ‘*Girlfriends*’ creates an environment fit for a closet where two women ‘slept in a single bed’. Lesbian passion magisterially saturates the ‘evening of amber’, ‘the pink shadows’ and ‘the sultry air’ (CP, 165). The maid in ‘Warming Her Pearls’ dreams about her mistress and dreams *through* her mirror how ‘my red lips parted’. The maid and the mistress are not at loggerheads with each other but one promotes the other’s cause. The maid-speaker desires recognition from her mistress as she imagines that she (the mistress) should sense her maid’s ‘faint, persistent scent/beneath her French perfume’ even during her dance with tall men. The mistress’s pearls become a badge of her identity, her sole occupation and obsession since ‘all night I (the maid) feel their absence and I burn’ (CP, 120). The question of justice or equality remains unresolved or even uncontested because of the maid’s visionary reciprocation of her courtship to the mistress. The speaker in ‘Before You Were Mine’ envisions her partner under the tree and speculates about her past relationship (probably heterosexual) that perhaps incorporated ‘those high-heeled red-shoes’ now reduced to ‘relics’: ‘That glamorous love lasts/where you sparkle and waltz and laugh before you were mine’ (CP, 187). In the long ‘The Laughter of Stafford Girls’ High’ from *Feminine Gospels* (2002)—though not a lesbian poem as such—the collective force of girls’ laughter overrides the existing academic disciplines and consequently, women are found queerly attracted to themselves. Such attraction destabilizes the infrastructure of the school as two female professors (Miss Batt and Miss Fife) resign in order to pursue their own life together and another professor Miss Dunn seduces the athletic girl-captain to accompany her to the Everest. The sole perpetrator of patriarchy, the married Mrs Mackay crumbles down by the end whereas those women who desire their fellow women adapt to the changed circumstance. Contrarily, in ‘Death of a

Teacher' in *Other Poems* the girl-student sympathizes with the school-mistress who taught poetry by Keats and Yeats and is now dead. Women teach male writing to women. But underlying is their mutual attraction.

Female homosexuality is also imagined in the relationships between mothers and daughters. Mothers or maternal elements surface in the poems in ways that foreground the intimate relationships women share with each other. Luce Irigaray points out the connection between motherhood and female homosexuality: 'Given that the first body with which [women] are involved, the first love with which they have to do, is a maternal love, is a female body, women are always—unless they renounce their desire—in a certain archaic and primary relationship to what is called homosexuality' (quoted in Holmlund, 291). Several Duffy poems depict such homosexual inclination to the maternal body. And they also suggest parallel positions—through writing, an issue we discuss in the later section—of the mother and the daughter. In '*The Way My Mother Speaks*' the homesick female narrator is distanced from her mother. Her present condition, though unstated how it is, is both 'happy and sad' (CP, 176), an indefinite state that vaguely reminds her of the initiatory erotic adventure in her childhood. Perhaps she remembers the moment since when the distancing started with the mother *i.e.*, through her sexual initiation with a man, something that threatened to demolish the daughter's maternal inheritance. Now, in another country, after sex has matured, the daughter relocates herself in her mother's shoe—'in love with the way my mother speaks.' Thus away from the mother the daughter develops deep desire for the maternal body. This desire is also rewarded in the little red-cap's retrieval of her grandmother's bones. In the way the red-cap kills her wolf-male-partner and ends heterosexual rivalry and returns home, traces the genealogy of homosexual affection that underlies the grandmother-mother-daughter bonding. The word 'feminine' in the title of the volume, *Feminine Gospels* suggests deep relation and interdependence among women. The volume *Ritual Lightning* (2009) also ends

dedicating a poem to Ella thus ensuring the continuity of the maternal genealogy. In the poem ‘Demeter’ as the mother celebrates the return of her daughter Demeter parallels her experience with that of her daughter. Persephone craves for female comfort after being raped in the underworld by Hades/Poseidon. As Irigary further suggests, ‘every woman is potentially a mother’ she indicates to that dimension of womanhood which requires passing through the essential phase of homosexuality (cited in Holmlund, 281).

In two poems from *The World’s Wife*, wives purposefully forge lesbian identity out of political sympathy. Although all women are in dialogue with their husbands Duffy’s sympathy so remarkably stands out for women that some scholars see in their complete rejection of heterosexual masculinity an affirmation of lesbian feminist sympathy. The difference here from the categories I previously identified is that whereas the voluptuous mistresses were shown to have sex out of lust and thus seemed to be immune to the sexual differences between men and women Mrs. Beast and the Kray Sisters carve out their own identities only after recognizing that difference well enough. They do not require male intervention for betterment. Best description appears in ‘Mrs. Beast’. A group of females (the Minotaur’s wife, Goldilocks, Frau Yellow Dwarf) clusters around a ‘bearded lesbian’ to play cards. Mutual relationality among females is not autochthonous. But all share a common history of defeat or betrayal at the hands of men: ‘But behind each player stood a line of ghosts/unable to win. Eve. Ashputtel. Marilyn Monroe.’ Lesbianism seems to result from mutual sympathy and is least related to heterosexual marriage. The speaker is affected by the history of loss and puts forward her political sympathy: ‘And I made a prayer--/thumbing my pearls, the tears of Mary, one by one, /like a rosary—words for the lost, the captive beautiful, /the wives, those less fortunate than we.../Let the less-loving one be me’ (CP, 298). Here the articulation of identity can be done in two ways: a characteristically Radicalesbian position in which she is a “‘woman identified’ woman” while simultaneously—and this unlike a Radical

Lesbian—pursuing heteronormative desire within marital relationship. The humanist lesbian feminist, Monique Wittig postulates that lesbians proffer the possibility of a sexless society and do not reinforce the ‘myths’ of ‘women’ (and ‘men’) as a class. In this way, a lesbian (like her) is an ‘escapee’ from ‘women’ as a class and one, who does not bear the ‘too much suffering’ the ‘myth’ of woman is encumbered with. But as we see, although Mrs. Beast ends up being a lesbian and she identifies the ‘myths’ and acknowledges that they have shadows of failure behind them, her genuine sympathies for ‘women’ as a class makes her to ‘reinforce’ the myth of a ‘Mrs.’ within a heterosexual relation, that Wittig declaims (Wittig: 2010, 10). Wittig could have accused Mrs. Beast of being ‘feminine’ as the latter pursues the heterosexual marriage but the poem’s lesbianism does not propose departure from the stance of being a woman. In ‘The Kray Sisters’, if the care and concern existent in the Kray Sisters’ firms is conceptualized as homosocial matrix, a kind of political sex-war raged against men, they could be viewed as radical lesbians too. Also it is the sisters—and they identify with Vita and Violet—who are central to other women’s admiration.

As I already stated in the aim of my essay, I will also show the problem with the adoption of lesbianism as a political ally. In the personal world of “Mr. Tiresias” lesbianism is shown as a reaction to male homosociality, rather than out of explicit sympathy for other women. Plus, male homosexuality is subjected to a wry and critical gaze from the wife’s point-of-view. Firstly, the prophet’s transformation into female is portrayed shocking to his wife: ‘The eyes were the same. /But in the shocking V of the shirt were breasts. / When he uttered my name in his woman’s voice I passed out.’ His transformation turns out to be purposive. His greed for power is pronounced when: ‘After the split I would glimpse him/out and about, /entering glitzy restaurants/on the arms of powerful men’. And Tiresias adopts all strategies to affirm his public visage as a woman. He empathizes with women; but that does not help him to understand his wife’s emotional crisis as he forbids public kissing. Duffy is

careful about all these contradictions and captures them sarcastically. The last stanza—the final section—ends with the violet hour when the wife-narrator manages to get a female partner of her own too. But again, the *wife* retains her former status since the entire act is performed *before* Tiresias's eyes. The wife visualizes her former husband imagine and flaunts him with the kiss that he denies: 'her bite, /her bite at the fruit of my lips, /and hear/ my red wet cry in the night....' (CP, 240, 242, 243). This is perhaps the subtlest of the female passions explored in the book. Despite his female garb, Tiresias is still a husband as Deryn Rees-Jones compares: 'Unlike Foucault's Herculine, the hermaphrodite who, with his indeterminate sex and confused gender, enjoys 'a multiplicity of pleasures', or Woolf's Orlando who, having become a woman, enjoys her relationship with men, Tiresias is unable to reconcile male inner feelings with the female surface of the body' (Rees-Jones, 161). It is not clear whether the wife still insists on her 'Otherness' to Tiresias *i.e.*, whether she upholds anything 'essential' to women/wives when masculinity is under the effect of the 'curse' as Tiresias claims. One explanation is this poem defamiliarizes the artificiality that underpins the constructions of the genders as it ends: 'I noticed then his hands, her hands, /the clash of their sparkling rings and their painted nails' (CP, 243). The lesbian Mrs. Tiresias's criticism of her female partner's 'painted nails' is obvious no doubt; but when a man changes his gender by *painting* nails, he actually reinforces the same gender attitudes. Lesbian passion stops to be secretive or marginalized when it is publicized. As Liz Yorke observes the problem: '[In] her later poems, Duffy will actively decenter identity, refuse the universalizing and romanticizing tendency inherent in earlier lesbian feminist approaches....These later poems characteristically refuse *jouissance*, refuse to imagine desire's consummation, even to imagine lesbian desire' (Yorke, 83).

The rest of this section now focuses on desires which are broad enough not to categorize them as homo/heterosexual. Various examined in terms of the alienation of the

self *i.e.*, the self/other divides or in term of the contradictory passions of rural/urban lover. I will, however, examine the contradictions of heterosexual passion as reflected and then will go for broader exposition of eroticism. If we juxtapose select poems from her oeuvre we can explore contradictory impulses that inform heterosexual passion. Both caustic hatred and selfless love assemble prominently in these poems.

First let us instantiate the rawest and uncompromising type of feminism which results from the suffering of women in heterosexual relationships. In 'Valentine' the narrator offers to her lover an onion as a token for love since its unpleasant particulars acutely metaphorize all the components of heterosexual amour: 'careful undressing', its lover-like capability to 'blind you with tears', 'its fierce kiss', its peelings like 'lethal' 'loops' of the wedding-ring, its knife-like scent (CP, 208). In 'To the Unknown Lover' from *The Pamphlet*, the blasting grows shriller. Heterosexual love is like a scar, one that reminds of the 'scar' on the vagina. The female speaker carries prophylactic to love as the prospective lover's very thought jabs like a 'future knife to my scar' (Selected Poems, 156). Suffering and betrayal in heterosexual marital relationship induce Miss Havisham to 'stab' her wedding-cake, Circe, to wish to 'dice' the hardened hearts of pig-men, Salome, to keep a torn man-head on her bedside.

My interest regarding desire and sexuality then segues into the feminist poet's representation of men and masculinity. It is important to understand the politics of her representation of men in order to elaborate on female sexualities. The range of her treatment of men and boys is exceptionally broad. In monologues like 'Boy', 'Eley's Bullet', 'Psychopath' from her early collections, the male speakers are vulnerable and they wryly illuminate some problematic aspects of man-woman interactions. The boy knows he is on 'safe slippers' by being small. And there are women who cannot help but be generous to the small-bodied men who call a woman 'mummy': 'There must be someone/out there who's kind to boys. Even if they grew' (CP, 151). The final twist of course satirizes men's

manipulation of women but also fingers at women's weakness for men's 'mummy' call. In 'Eley's Bullet', the protagonist feels dual attraction for his gun with his name on it and for a lady. His love proves fatal to him. At the end of their rendezvous the married woman escapes, having combed her hair and said to him a mere 'sorry'. It is a word to which only the feline woman has access; to him—with his bullet-and-gun—such tender word sounds like a dead-language. Plus the very site of a woman's taking care of herself offends his possessiveness. After the spell has vanished he kills himself. In 'Psychopath', the daredevil psychopath provides a proud depiction of a rape he commits in the retribution for his abuse in childhood by 'Dirty Alice': 'No don't. One thump did it, then I was on her, /giving her everything I had' (CP, 89). He is indifferent to the consequences of his deeds but justifies them because 'you get one chance in this life/and if you screw it you're done for, uncle, no mistake' (CP, 89). In all these poems Duffy offers her keen insight into men's psychology and their fallibility although not without satirizing their follies simultaneously. Ian Gregson, based on these male-images commends her: '[Compared with Adrienne Rich's] Duffy is much less concerned to evolve a universalizing poetic system and this leaves her free to explore the nuances that are present and the *shifts that occur inside gender interactions*' (Gregson, 159; emphasis added).

Yet I wish to distinguish between sympathy and criticism or venom reserved for men here. Men are not represented objectively but through their monologues wherein women play pivotal role. All men as the above discussion shows are anti-feminist no doubt. Their circumstances allow them least sympathy for women. So from beneath we discern the thread of sympathy for the female sufferers—the old woman derided by a 'boy', young virgin raped by a 'psychopath', a married woman demonized by the gun-loving Eley. These are women who cannot account for themselves like the voluble wives. The poet implicitly brings out those women's silence through male-voiced monologues. So, I agree with what Sarah

Broom's characterization of these poems as 'a woman's fantasy of a particular kind of male subjectivity' (Broom, 89).

Later, the same satiric intensity informs her wives who vocally chastise men. This switchover of voice from male to female is affirmed by Duffy's own 2002 interview: 'I doubt I would now write a poem in male voice' (cited in Broom, 89). Here women are the speakers who 'share...jokes at the expense of men' as Deryn Rees-Jones pithily says (Rees-Jones, 158). Mrs. Icarus, Mrs. Pilate, Mrs. Midas, Frau Freud, Mrs. Sisyphus are aware of their husbands' failure—of their lost, vain project, unrealizable ambition. Mrs. Faust is compelled to bear his dead husband's secret out of pity. Mrs. Aesop construes her husband's bland moralizing as tedious and a thing he does from having nothing else to do. At the end of her world-wide travel, Mrs. Rip Van Winkle discovers her husband rattling Viagra. This is how Duffy's early understanding of men's psyche empowers her later crude version of feminisms as reflected in the wives' monologues. We see that sympathy is not completely withdraw the representations of men but they are completely silenced.

After such literal and fiercely feminist condemnation it is difficult to expect any positive or benign note in heterosexual love poetry. And apparently her *Rapture* does not disabuse us of any of the distressful consequence of heterosexuality as hinted at above. First, the first-person-speaker is disembodied--of indefinite sex—and the nature or practicality of actual relation is ambiguous or merely imaginary. And second, as Margaret Reynolds points out in her review, as a poem-circle written in traditional veins, desire ends sadly, without fulfillment (Reynolds, 2005). A woman ends unhappily, trapped in her body.

Yet one cannot miss the intensity of passions that permeates the lines like 'Make me your lady./I'll say I do, I do./I'll be ash in a jar, for you/ to scatter my life./Make me your wife' ('Betrothal'; CP, 389), 'Huge skies connect us, joining here to there./Desire and passion on the thinking air' ('Rapture'; CP, 384) or 'If I was dead.../I swear your love/would raise

me/out of my grave/in my flesh and blood,/like Lazarus' ('If I was Dead'; CP, 380). They betray longings which are less feminist or political and more in line with traditional expression of desire. Thus the interface between desire and female subjectivity becomes extremely combated.

I propose two ways to address the problem. First, she emphasizes the need to write desire itself by drawing on the dual inheritances of poetry written in the tradition of male self-vulnerability and female desire articulated through nature. Interestingly, when the lesbian-feminist poet Adrienne Rich bitterly critiques the male literary tradition in her *Twenty-One Love Poems* because of its 'silence burying unwanted children--/women, deviants, witness—in desert sand' and further, the inability of Blake, Kafka, Swift, Goethe, Claudel to represent them—especially women—properly (Rich: 1976, sonnet V), Duffy cites great dead white men like Virgil, Chaucer and Shakespeare. It is not to suggest that her referencing them is not elective or uncritical—she writes Anne Hathaway's monologue—but that unlike Rich, Duffy cites traditional authors as sources of love poetry. She imagines a song from Chaucer to his valentine. The epigraph of her *Rapture* comes from *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and Shakespeare's sonnets' echoes flit through Duffy's poems in this volume. One attends to the female voice which is manifest at places. In the poem 'Give' she opposes the female giver who is embodied as Nature and the implied masculine consumer who exploit all the elements of nature 'forest', 'river', 'the gold from the sun', 'the hedgerows', 'the silvery cold of the moon' etc. (CP, 396) . Along with such feminist poems she has arranged other apparently non-feminist ones. In fact, Duffy herself acknowledges her inheritance of both male and female traditions of writing in 'The Love Poem'. I find this poem not a straight, uncomplicated assertion of desire since along with Barrett Browning with whom she utters heterosexual phrase she adapts voices from the male poets like Shakespeare, Donne, Marlow, Sidney and P. B. Shelley and thus she queers—though not rejecting—her own distinctively

English tradition. Some poems are reduced to mere articulation of erotic desire without hinting at the sex of the narrator much in the way the desiring narrator in Jeannette Winterson's *Written on the Body* is unnamed, unidentified, only with the difference that unlike Winterson's beloved married woman, Duffy beguiles even the sex of the desired subject. Thus desire is 'written' when it remains otherwise unattainable on earth as she closes 'The Love Poem' by citing Shelley: 'the desire of the moth/for the star'. The philosopher, George Bataille says: 'Poetry leads to the same place as all forms of eroticism—to the blending and fusion of separate objects'. Bataille however does not speak of—and Duffy's poem-circle also ends with 'a blush of memory' and nothing else—the attainability of the beloved object but of the 'likelihood of the suffering' in love for *suffering* 'alone reveals the total significance of the beloved object' (Bataille, 25, 20). The result is her inscription—through language, words, poetry—of the impossible desires. She herself indicates the relation between love, as experience and love transformed into poems: 'In *Rapture*, I was also interested in the love poem itself—in how much distance, if any, there is between the experience of love and the expression of it in the poetic language. If love is the most powerful of emotions, is the love poem the most powerful of poems?'ⁱ (quoted in Dowson, 62).

Second, in her post-*Rapture* period we see a reworking of man-woman relation. Complaints are replaced by acceptance and virulent feminism, by a matured woman's reasoning. In 'Death and the Moon' from *Feminine Gospels*, a poem composed in memory of Adrian Henri, the poet-persona acknowledges the incapability of her poetry to reach the dead ex-lover. She is no more accusing him of betrayal but says: 'The black night/is huge, mute, and you are further forever than that' (CP, 365) as if the true relation between a man and a woman is beyond human grasp. A mild love-poem 'Simon Powell' is the poet's appreciation of a man's smile and style. The perspective is a woman's; the speaker is different from the addressee; but there is no sexual rivalry as it was in *The World's Wife*.

II

As I have discussed the role of language in the articulation desire I now focus on the language in which it is inscribed. However, my aim is to study not just the language of desire in abstraction but also in connection with my earlier exposition on sexualities, to examine the relation between sexuality and the language that addresses issues related to those sexualities.

In ‘Demeter’ Duffy herself classifies two types of words she employs in her poetry: ‘tough words’ as hard as ‘granite, flint, to break the ice’ and words ‘softened and warmed’ like ‘the blue sky smiling’. If these are the two modes in which she writes, what relation do they bear to the issues we discussed previously? I suggest that we can find traces of a feminine language where semiotic elements are present along with a strong and symbolic dimension in her composition.

In such conceptualization of her language I am visibly drawing on the notion of female writing—or the female/maternal components in writing—as theorized by different feminists. While in psychoanalysis, as formulated by Lacan, language is the province of the paternal law, a realm of the univocal symbolic, an order that forecloses the maternal, feminists like Kristeva point out the limitation of such a formulation. Kristeva argues that poetic language incorporates the maternal somatic elements in that it allows the free play of the semiotic drives which release the heterogeneous force of signification in language and which therefore, cannot be colonized by the symbolic. Yet the two modalities, she argues—the semiotic and the symbolic—are always co-existent and inseparable in the signifying process. All types of discourse (including poetry) are ‘necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both’ (Kristeva, 93). I want to apply this insight into her poetryⁱⁱ.

Some poems consciously attempt to effectuate the semiotic function of the language. It is not to suggest that these poems are being more semiotic over others since no text, as ‘signifying practice’, Kristeva argues, can merely be a transcription of the semiotic. Yet some

of her poems specifically depict the poetic quest for the semiotic elements which is ‘indifferent to language, enigmatic and feminine, [a] space underlying the written’ (Kristeva, 97). ‘The Little Red-Cap’ precisely recapitulates the whole process. The little red-cap rescues the female tradition of writing by hacking the ravenous male wolf-poet. Duffy satirizes the unchanging patriarchal tradition of writing poetry as the wolf’s ‘howls (of) the same old song at the moon, year in, year out.’ Such outworn mechanism of writing even kills the ‘white dove’ which as Milton invoked her, once operated as the living spirit of poetry and the young poet-narrator once sought after. Now the white bird having been murdered she has to hack open the wolf from ‘scrotum to throat’ in order to renew the source of maternal (CP, 229). Jeannette Winterson suggests that the retrieval of grandma’s glistening white bone is the metaphor of the recovery of female language or of the female semiotic particles of the language since ‘(the) skeleton of language is female. Deeper, it seems, than our mother tongue’ (Winterson, 2015). The poem ‘River’ from *The Other Country* opens: ‘At the turn of the river the language changes, /a different babble, even a different name/for the same river’ (CP, 175). The line 7 ends with a ‘woman’ who responds to a bird. This is near the bay where ‘the meanings of things’ vanish. The ‘babble’ is what Mallarme said—and Kristeva quotes him--‘The Mystery of the Language’. Meaning vanishes where the ‘signifying practice’ of the text takes a turn for ‘drifting-into-nonsense’, a phrase I am not using pejoratively but to suggest the purely feminine or semiotic elements which ends the ‘signifying practice’ itself (Kristeva, 104). In ‘The Way My Mother Speaks’, the same discharge of feminine libidinal drives begins in another country when memory carries her back to the ‘green erotic pond’. If the relationship involves movement forward to England the inclination is still for the mother who stands on the other side of the pond, in the native country. It seems the way the mother ‘speaks’—and the daughter understands—is something only women understand, words that issue from female genitalia, words that blur boundaries among women. In ‘Invisible Ink’ she

acknowledges the ‘first draft of the (poetic) gift’ to be anonymous which is, as Woolf says, is the signature of a woman writing. This first text is, she says, ‘texted from heart to lips’ in a way the semiotic is characterized as a ‘space underlying writing’ or as a ‘precondition of the symbolic’ (Kristeva, 103). If the twig symbolizes the pen, the sap she alternately dips and sips is the maternal fluid that remains all along as ‘invisible ink’ or as she says by the end of the poem, ‘fluent, glittery stream’ (CP, 454). And finally, to return to the characteristic poem with which we started our discussion, the heartbroken Demeter’s ‘tough words’ dilutes as Persephone arrives with ‘all spring’s flowers/to her mother’s house’ (CP, 300). Pointing to the correspondence between femininity and soft words Michelis and Rowland write: ‘The mother is choosing tough words just as Duffy chooses tough words to affirm a world in which identity politics still matters.’ But through the soft language (‘the small shy mouth of a new moon’) the ‘hopeful image of new femininity’ is restored (Michelis and Rowland, 28).

The influence of the semiotic cannot be dissociated from the question of the female tradition of writing. Betsy Erkkila sees in the Demeter-Persephone myth the female poets’ internal ‘kinship’ in the domain of patriarchal poetic tradition in contrast to the more antagonist relation among their male counterparts: ‘Like Persephone in the Underworld, the *female* poet in the *patriarchal world* frequently experiences a sense of separation from her matrilineal heritage; she seeks release and renewal through reunion with her *matrilineal sources*’ (Erkkila, 544; emphasis added). This ‘renewal’ of the lineage is possible through a ‘common’ female language that binds together a common female tradition of writing.

Then how does she employ ‘tough words’? Most of her poems in *The World’s Wife* can be cited as examples of using harsh, abusive words by women. I am quoting how Mrs. Quasimodo revenges herself upon her husband who is attracted to a slim gypsy: ‘I should have known./Because it’s better, isn’t it, to be well formed./Better to be slim, be slight,/your slender neck quoted between two thumbs;/[...]/And given sanctuary/But not betrayed./Not

driven to an ecstasy of loathing yourself:/banging your ugly head against a wall,/gaping in the mirror at your heavy dugs,/your thighs of lard,/your mottled upper arms;/thumping at your belly--/look at it--/your wobbling gut' (TWW, 39). As we see she does not end up silent, suicidal by submitting herself to feminine self-effacement, but hoarsely revels in the loathing figure she possesses. What such tough injunctions in poems after poems do is that they solidify the identity of the wives although not in self-defeating gestures. Their assertive language of self-justification contains and internalizes 'semiotic motility'. Such language has symbolic function in the concretization of the identity of 'women'.

As we have identified the two distinctive styles in which Duffy addresses the female subjectivities two questions can be raised. First, is her language of poetry underpinned by any aim to develop a common female language, one that shares the experience of suffering with other women (poets)? Adrienne Rich cites the newly-liberated women's attempt to 'find language and images for a consciousness we are just coming into' in her essay 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision.' Such a language, she argues, helps women-poets to 'tap' and 'explore' 'the victimization and the anger experienced by women' (Rich 1972: 25). In the completely different tradition of French Feminist tradition, Irigary proposes the possibility of such a 'New' female language. 'When Our (women's) Lips Speak Together', as Irigary characterizes women's language as issuing out of their two embracing lips, it will become 'inexhaustible' because '[It] knows neither want nor plenty. Since we give each other all, with nothing held back, nothing hoarded, our exchanges are without terms, without end. How can I say it? The language we know is so limited'. Like Rich, she dwells on the importance of a common language because 'if we don't find our body's language, it will have too few gestures to accompany our story. We shall tire of the same ones, and leave our desires unexpressed, unrealized...we shall remain paralyzed, deprived of our movements' (Irigary, 213-14). Does Duffy's poetry propose any such thing?

As our instances have demonstrated Duffy's wives employ tough rhetoric in order to counter their subordination. They scarcely proclaim or acknowledge their defeat before their men. Even if they do so, their vibrant self-justification overrides any self-injuring implications. They identify the source of agony and directly hits at it without qualms. Their speaking back implies their outright rejection of male authority and the determination no longer to hover in blank places. Emily Dickinson compares the state of womanhood which is relatively free with that of a wife whose life is not so yet 'safer'. But the poem ends with ironic self-assertion: 'I'm wife! Stop there!' (Dickinson, 112) When being wife harnesses some status to a woman it is a state of absolute bondage nevertheless. One cannot even compare the two states—so they 'stop' there as if the 'wife' is at the verge of permanent collapse and so mask their weakness by drawing attention to their social status. Duffy's wives—the word 'wives' itself imply subordination to men—however, does not stop contemplating their distress; they do not even 'stop' at being wives but return with retribution. We find them as extremely vocal. The first-person voices invest immense power in narrators who have agencyⁱⁱⁱ over their own language. In their trenchant critiques repressed anger finds an outlet. This freedom of expression makes their language different from that 'of pains taken, of dogged tentativeness...of a woman...who is determined not to appear angry...(when) things have been said which are attacks on her very integrity', a tone of deeply entrenched resentment Rich recognizes in the intonation of Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (Rich 1972: 20). By simultaneously voicing wives' desire and attacking men's shortcomings, this volume promotes a robust form of feminism which does *not* 'translate' women's place, as Showalter wrote in a review essay, 'into the crude topography of hole and bulge' (cited in Erkkila, 542). Thus the emphasis on exclusively female language is, I believe, still less than on the possibility of a 'feminine' way of conceptualization.

So the last two distinct styles of feminist writing and also the range of female subjectivities she addresses show that Duffy's language is more heterogeneous than the narrowness implied in the word 'common'^{iv}.

But the problem moves on. So my second question is: if her language constitutes multiple discourses of female subjectivities as I have just shown, what is the extent of the power of language in the articulations of different sexualities (which are mostly female and lesbians)? Language has played an important role the inscription of desire. Should sexualities too be seen as mere 'written' in language? Jane Thomas extends the power of language to its farthest limit when she assesses her poetry: 'in her later collections Duffy becomes increasingly skeptical of a notion of truth existing outside, beyond or before language'. And since she 'is committed to exposing and exploiting the creative potential of language...it has the power to reconstitute the world in differently meaningful ways' (Thomas, 140, 135). In asserting the power of language in the proposed 'reconstitution' of reality she chimes with Butler's claim which she phrases as 'the possibility of destabilizing and resignifying our gendered identities...and (of bringing) into being new, compromised alternative subject positions which are equally unstable' (Thomas, 135). While Thomas's statement satisfactorily explains Duffy's unfeminine way to address feminist cause, I do not however wish to remove these poems of their subversive potentials. In her essay 'The chant of magic words repeatedly: gender as linguistic act in the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy' Thomas does not instantiate those poems where the articulation of definite sexualities play subversive if not outright political roles. The articulation of the position 'wife' has some ossifying effect, no doubt. But should we dislodge the subversive potential from the sexual positions by considering them as 'linguistic' category? I have already shown how Duffy's construction of female subjectivities has not been monolithic. I have shown how her women in 'The Laughter of Stafford Girls' High' find viable alternative if not queer possibility of living. If

the ‘new compromising alternative’ possibility is ‘equally unstable’ as Thomas phrases Butler, we must see such poems as merely caricature and politically neutralized. If these positions are mere linguistic constructs, the possibility to empower various marginalized sexualities (*e.g.*, wives, lesbians) and to address the problems and contradictions these positions engage with, will be found superfluous. Moreover, I find problem with Thomas’s investment in ‘the creative potential of language’ to ‘reconstitute the world’. Peter Digerer points out the problem inherent in the ‘pure performative fluidity’ proposed by Butler (to whom Thomas is indebted) that the performative act becomes unsuccessful without certain ‘constative’ elements^v. By attacking the constative elements of the sexed body *i.e.*, the various ‘truths’ that support the difference of the sexes, Butler deconstructs the ‘performative character of the sexed body’. Yet the prerequisite of successful parodic subversion is certain basis constitutive of one’s gender. In parody the confusion must be created ‘over whether the gesture is constituting one’s gender or expressing it’ (Digerer: 1994, 666-7). Equally, when Thomas proposes the possibility of ‘reconstituting’ the world based on linguistic play, we must ask what the poet wishes to reconstruct. Secretive girl-lovers, discontented heterosexual women, argumentative wives reconstitute a poetic tradition which usually privileges men^{vi}. Through certain gender neutral poems of *Rapture* attempts have been made to reconcile the rival traditions but different sexualities have received individual treatments in other volumes too. Thus I accept Thomas’s statement when I explain the more than one way in which feminist subjectivities are addressed. In her poetry the female sex is not ‘one’ as various feminists have already characterized women. Yet conscious feminist rhetoric in different poems prevents us from reducing those subjectivities as facile linguistic constructs.

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ⁱ The expression of desire functions as the primary end of language/writing not for the first time in Rapture. The poem 'Two Small Poems of Desire' from *The Other Country* features erotic desire of the narrator whose spark of desire feels like 'an animal learning vowel'. In the absence of the lover/beloved s/he tries to put in language their amorous exchange: 'It feels like tiny gardens/growing in the palms of the hands,/invisible,/sweet, if they had a scent' (CP, 164). The sex of the lovers is unspecified as is the precise nature of their sex itself. But their language of desire, the commentator Antony Rowland argues, 'transcends gender difference' and 'creates a universalist love poem' (Michelis and Rowland, 66, 68). In this poem, he argues, Duffy establishes herself as a post-structuralist poet since 'an identity is (here) modulated by a pre-existing linguistic system; in this case, the historical category of desire' (Michelis and Rowland, 67).

ⁱⁱ Despite her appreciation for Kristeva's bringing out of the semiotic 'revolution' in poetic language, in her essay 'The Body Politic of Julia Kristeva', Judith Butler later repudiates her attempt to subsume the semiotic/the maternal under the symbolic as her 'fear of (her) regression to homosexuality (which is) a fear of losing cultural (paternal-heterosexual) sanction and privilege altogether' (Butler, 112). I address Butler's argument in the last part of the section.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kate McKluskie points out the contradiction between Adrienne Rich's proposition for a 'common' language of women's own and her own realization of the female poet at the end of her poem 'Planetarium' as a 'mediator between the impulses of women's experience and images which will give them meaning' (McKluskie, 58). Duffy's female speakers are not much different from Rich's female poet-transcriptor who is 'an instrument in the shape/of a woman trying to translate pulsations/into images' (Rich, quoted in McKluskie, 58).

^{iv} This is an issue Montefiore addresses as she notes the difficulty of Rich's notion I have stated above: '[The] notion of a female language has to be metaphorical since any language spoken or written only by women would be bound to become a ghetto dialect....that in the end turn out to be a definition of how cliché originates' (Montefiore, 82).

^v J. L. Austin in his *How to Do Things with Words* posits two distinct dimensions of language: performative and constative. The performatives are the injunctions to 'do' things in language. So they cannot be true/false but be counted as successful or not. Constatives, on the other hand, can be true or false. But this binary is problematic towards the end of his book. Digeser illustrates: 'He (Austin) argues that all utterances have a happiness/unhappiness and a truth/falsehood dimension. For example, in order for a promise to be successful, certain things have to be true: I must have a certain intention, I must be able to carry out the promised act, I must have said certain words and so on. Without these constative elements, a promise would never get off the ground' (Digeser 1994: 663).

^{vi} Antony Rowland briefly addresses the potential of the poem 'Two Small Poems of Desire' to reconstitute the pastoral tradition of English Poetry since the second part self-consciously echoes Wordsworth's 'Daffodils'. When Wordsworth sees a flash of daffodil in his 'inward eye', the Duffy-narrator by 'staring inwards' as she brings out words to depict the feel. If it is a lesbian love-poem, its unusual metre, suggests Rowland, 'could be interpreted as a subversion of the sonnet form to present a region of women's experience elided in literary tradition. The prospect is immediately rendered dialectical by the framing device of two pentameters in lines one and fourteen. Hence the paradox of the sonnet as a whole: a post-structuralist version of the love-lyric is offered in the conventional form of the metrical *blason*' (Michelis and Rowland, 2003: 68).