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Putting Myths Straight: Education through Retelling in the Poetry of Duffy

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Abstract

Carol Ann Duffy in *The World's Wife* does not take mythmaking for granted or view's it as something that is unrelated to life, but, makes it central because myth operates upon, explains and shapes the world, containing within itself emotional truths which help the audience/listener/reader to make sense of the world. I argue that in Duffy's retellings, education takes place within the poems as the characters address their target audience directly, and in doing so, the tradition of storytelling continues, not explaining, but communicating with authority and experience from *inside* the story and in doing so, we, as readers are also educated about alternate modes of living.

Keywords: myth, retelling, education, sexuality, marriage, life

Carol Ann Duffy, the first and only woman poet laureate of England, in her volume *The World's Wife* educates the reader that the myths and legends that have been used to teach young women about their place, namely "woman as mother, and woman as desirable maid" (Bodkin, 176) have a different trajectory now. As Duffy retells the tales of women who are "entrapped in myths which robbed (them) of (their) independent being and value" (Rich, 508), she breaks this hold of the past by not only rejecting it but also by setting forth a new state of being where women, with or without their husbands, learn contentment and to live by their own wits. Breaking the hold of myth is a daunting task for :

Facts can be disproved, and theories based on them will yield in time to rational arguments and proof that they don't work. But myth has its own, furious, inherent



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reason-to-be because it is tied to desire. Prove it false a hundred times, and it will still endure because it is true as an expression of feeling. (Janeway, 32)

I argue that in Duffy's retellings, education takes place within the poems as the characters address their target audience directly, and in doing so, the tradition of storytelling continues, not explaining, but communicating with authority and experience from *inside* the story and in doing so, we, as readers are also educated about alternate modes of living. Duffy shows and explores the private world and knowledge that is shared between wife and husband, presented in her wife-husband poems from *The World's Wife*, often in a humorous manner, even as the stories are adapted to make a feminist case. Duffy does not take mythmaking for granted or see it as something that is unrelated to life, but, makes it central because myth operates upon, explains and shapes the world, containing within itself emotional truths which help the audience/listener/reader to make sense of the world. In what follows, in the first section, I outline and explore Duffy's retellings in terms of how wives learn to be assertive and take control of their marriages and lives. Duffy also shows how this successful negotiation can sometimes be impossible giving us a realistic portrait of the irretrievable breakdown that sometimes exists within a marriage. In the second and final section I have analysed two poems which highlight the possibility of women wanting independent lives, in spite of, or because of, their romantic and married lives. Seen comprehensively, these selections and their analyses demonstrate my thesis regarding Duffy's poetry: that Duffy's poetry is a pedagogic tool, for characters within the poems, but also for her readers, who, as they witness the characters, see familiar patterns of behaviour and also see modes of coping with, or escaping from those patterns. Carol Ann Duffy's writing in *The World's Wife* introduces us to the wives and women who are usually made invisible in the traditional male-centric narratives of the world, and as these women speak, we are offered an alternative perspective regarding the prominent men to whom they are related¹.

Surviving Marriage

¹Feminist retellings of mythical figures or minor characters from real life and literature are found in the poetry of Anne Stevenson, Vicki Feaver, Liz Lochhead, Fleur Adcock, Jo Shapcott as well as Duffy's body of verse.



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“The wife’s best friend”: Sex and marriage

The logic of myth is not necessarily straightforward but it must be kept in mind that Freud used the Oedipus myth successfully to enunciate his theory regarding the male child’s attachment to his mother, using the myth to explain and theorize neurosis. In “Frau Freud”, Duffy leads readers to view Freud with an element of skepticism, through the voice of his wife, who in her turn, debunks the theory of penis-envy, almost making it into a myth. The intimate and private knowledge shared between a couple is extended to an audience of ladies in “Frau Freud,” a satire on Freud’s theory of penis-envy. Frau Freud confesses that she has seen her “fair share of ding-a-ling” and goes on elaborating on this one idea, using several slang terms for the penis and in conclusion she speaks of her feelings regarding penises and from that draws a generalization:

... Don’t get me wrong, I’ve no axe to grind
with the snake in the trousers, the wife’s best friend,
the weapon, the python – I suppose what I mean is,
ladies, dear ladies, the average penis – not pretty ...
the squint of its envious solitary eye ... one’s feeling of
pity ... (Duffy, 55)

The theory of penis- envy, formulated by Freud and accepted as fact for many decades is discounted by Frau Freud with her intimate knowledge of penises. In the poem as Frau Freud addresses a gathering of ladies there is a suggestion of comparable, if not equal, power and position, to that enjoyed by her husband, of having a valid voice. The validity of her voice gains strength with its humorous undertones and the quiet certainty which shines though in her calm utterance. Her views on penises are encapsulated in the lines wherein she says, “Don’t get me wrong, I’ve no axe to grind/ with the snake in the trousers, the wife’s best friend. . . .”. Frau Freud



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attacks both Freud's theory and his penis in her statement that an inadequate penis can only evoke pity and not envy, and as she concludes her piece, she has also planted a doubt in the reader's mind as to whether Freud's theory stemmed from a personal inadequacy, the theory making up for his other shortcomings. According to Gloria Steinem, "Male human beings have built whole cultures around the idea that penis-envy is "natural" to women—though having such an unprotected organ might be said to make men vulnerable, and the power to give birth makes womb-envy at least as logical" (Steinem, unpaginated). Duffy too seems to be suggesting an alternative to penis-envy, and for the speaker in "Frau Freud" that is penis-pity, not envy. In doing so she educates the listeners about other possible and plausible theories, thus also demonstrating how to defeat a theory with another theory. Duffy also educates her readers by throwing in the passing reference to Monica Lewinsky². Frau Freud unpicks the male narrative, about not just penis envy and related issues of power within her marriage, but also the vicious, negative gossip that circulated in 1998 when the scandal about Ms Lewinsky and the President of the United States broke, and the former was portrayed as a power hungry, immoral woman who was willing to go to any lengths to align herself with the most powerful man in the world. By equating herself with Lewinsky, by claiming that she is as "au fait with Hunt-the-Salami as Ms M. Lewinsky" she also overturns the traditional valorization of virtuous wives as opposed to immoral young women such as Monica Lewinsky, who are seen as dangerous to marriages. Frau Freud destroys both, the theory of penis-envy and the stereotypical categorization of women as virtuous and immoral, a categorization based solely upon their knowledge of sexual matters.

"Mrs. Aesop" begins with the tradition of the wife being bullied by her husband, so much so that she is mainly a silent listener. Mrs. Aesop introduces her husband as "small, / didn't prepossess. So he tried to impress" (19) and the impression he made on Mrs. Aesop was "he could bore for Purgatory" with his countless and constant production and imposition of fables with morals such as "*Dead men, / Mrs. Aesop, he'd say, tell no tales*" (19) and tired of his homilies she tells us her version of the saying that a bird in the hand is worth two in a bush,

²Monica Lewinsky was an intern at the White House between 1995-97 whose sexual relationship with the-then US President Bill Clinton came to light in 1998 and which then led to Clinton being impeached.



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“Well, let me tell you now / that the bird in his hand shat on his sleeve, / never mind the two worth less in the bush” (19) thus jibing at his self-righteousness.

Their wearisome marriage is brought out in the metaphor of a tortoise when Mr. and Mrs. Aesop see an old hare and a neighbor’s pet tortoise, which Mrs. Aesop describes as “creeping, slow as marriage”, implying the boredom that characterizes their marriage. This discontent with their marriage is taken up by Mrs. Aesop when her husband preaches at her, “*Action, Mrs. A., speaks louder / than words*” (19). Mrs. Aesop immediately takes it up and decides to shut him up forever. For the couple, sex:

was diabolical. I gave him a fable one night

about a little cock that wouldn’t crow, a razor-sharp axe

with a heart blacker than the pot that called the kettle.

I’ll cut off your tail, all right, I said, to save my face.

That shut him up. I laughed last, longest. (Duffy, 19)

Mrs. Aesop finally gets to have her say and she does so, using his very method of teaching through fables. That Aesop is impotent is suggested by the metaphor of the cock that refuses to crow, and Mrs. Aesop threatens to cut it off to save her face. Through Mrs. Aesop, Duffy teaches women to use their wits, to put an end to the burden of being made permanent listeners and to instead, reverse the roles.

Both Frau Freud and Mrs. Aesop triumph by turning their husbands’ areas of expertise against them. They both use the knowledge they have of their husbands and their modes of thought and theorization to make sense of their situations and eventually via that knowledge they are able to turn the tables upon their husbands. The education we receive is via many features: firstly, by giving a voice to faceless, voiceless wives, Duffy resurrects them and brings them to the



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spotlight. Secondly, by showing them as quietly confident, comfortable in their own skins, intelligent and thoughtful, she transforms them from just wives to individuals and persons, articulating their thoughts, possessing views of their own. And finally, when they use the theories and modes for which their husbands are famous, they demonstrate not just knowledge of their husbands, but also their confidence in their own acumen, which enables them to use those theories and modes to assert their own views.

In “Mrs. Sisyphus” we see a woman who is neglected by her husband, ignored by him as he slaves at his “work”, and Duffy uses the myth of Sisyphus to teach us readers certain lessons. Duffy’s opening line “That’s him pushing the stone up the hill” strikes a kindred note with Robert Browning’s opening line “That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall” in “My Last Duchess” (Browning, 402) and by implication draws a comparison between the speakers, jealous spouses both. Mrs. Sisyphus finds her husband’s monotonous job, of pushing the stone uphill, rather illogical, “He might as well bark / at the moon” and “that feckin’ stone’s no sooner up / then it’s rolling back / all the way done” (Duffy, 21). Mrs. Sisyphus seems to suggest that he is as good as mad because he fails to understand the futility of his labour, and refuses to pay heed to his wife³. If the speaker in “My Last Duchess” kills his wife for being pleased too easily, Mrs. Sisyphus, livid with rage, wishes to “do something vicious to him with a dirk” (21). However, Mrs. Sisyphus only wishes it, and does not actually hurt her husband but at the end of the poem we are told something which is as disturbing as her desire to harm her husband physically. She says, “My voice reduced to a squawk”,/ My smile to a twisted smirk” (22). In the process of telling us the Sisyphus story, Duffy leads us to think about what happens when language no longer serves its purpose of communication: in such situations Duffy seems to suggest it is as good as a squawk, free of words and maybe, meaningless, reducing humans to the level of animals. This situation succinctly sums up the absurdity of the married life of Sisyphus and Merope, where husband and wife are no longer able to communicate. The husband is so

³In the many versions of the original myth, Sisyphus is condemned to this fruitless labour *in the Underworld* and his wife has no role once the punishment is underway. Duffy’s poem re-imagines the Sisyphus myth as one that is not related to punishment, one which leaves Sisyphus no choice, but as an agential choice made by Sisyphus.



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preoccupied with his “work” that he has no time for his wife. The wife, thus neglected, gives vent to her righteous rage but is still trapped within her marriage.

In Duffy’s poem, Sisyphus has not only stopped listening to his wife but unable, or unwilling, to neglect his “work”, he leaves her abandoned and alone in their nuptial bed, where she spends her time in the dark “feeling like Noah’s wife did / when he hammered away at the Ark; / like Frau Johann Sebastian Bach” (Duffy,22). Mrs. Sisyphus is aware that she is not the first woman to be ignored by her husband, in favor of work, and she likens her situation to Noah’s wife who suffered loneliness because her husband was hammering “away at the Ark”, and like Frau Johann Sebastian Bach, whose husband was busy creating divine music, and in the process, neglected his wife⁴. Sisyphus’s task, i.e. his work, which is an exercise in self-defeat, makes their marriage, a source of acrimony and argument. Mrs. Sisyphus, a modern day speaker is critical of Sisyphus’s work ethic, giving “one hundred per cent and more to his work” (22), but the humor also lies in seeing Sisyphus as “working” at his punishment and the conflation of Noah, Bach and Sisyphus, makes all workaholic husbands similar, as they privilege their jobs, such as they are, over their wives, whether dead or alive.

By telling us Mrs. Sisyphus’s story, Carol Ann Duffy highlights the impossibility of happiness within a marriage where one of the partners privileges work over all else. While it is possible to take issue with this reading of a myth wherein Sisyphus has no choice, by adapting it and pointing to Mrs. Sisyphus’s concerns, Duffy also shows us how the myth can be viewed differently. As Mrs. Sisyphus lies “alone in the dark . . .” her words meaningless, her smile reduced to a “smirk”, we see the breakdown of a marriage. Here there is no possibility of the wife triumphing: language itself has failed her and she is no longer comprehensible to her husband, the futility of his labor underlined by the fact that they can no longer connect with each other. There is no “time to pop open a cork / or go for so much as a walk in the park?” It is via details such as these that we witness the end of a marriage, the slow breakdown which is seen in

⁴Duffy might be obliquely remarking on how Bach’s work kept him from being there at his first wife’s death-bed, and for her funeral, as well. He discovered the fact of her death and burial when he returned two months later, and mourned her by supposedly writing a magnificent piece of music.



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the final lines where there is a lonely Mrs. Sisyphus in the marital bed, but as, if not far worse, is the impossibility of Sisyphus understanding her words, as all she does now is “squawk”. Duffy’s portrayals of marriages are varied and while we may see triumphant women who gain the upper hand by being able to shape a narrative, we also see women such as Mrs. Sisyphus who are left with no solace; even their words mangled and robbed of all meaning.

A self of one’s own

Penelope, the wife of the Greek hero, Ulysses finds a new meaning to life in the absence of her husband, in Duffy’s eponymously titled poem⁵. After mourning her husband’s departure, and longing for his return, watching for him for “six months” she “sorted cloth, and scissors, needle, thread” (Duffy, 70). The speaker confesses that she first took to stitching “thinking to amuse myself, / but found a lifetime’s industry instead” (70) suggestive of a new way of looking at life, her life, and what work can mean within that life. The speaker’s choice of the subject of her “industry” is indicative of her life: “I sewed a girl / under a single star – cross-stitch, silver silk – / running after childhood’s bouncing ball” and “I chose between three greens for the grass; / a smoky pink, a shadow’s grey” (Duffy, 70). If men have the privilege of writing autobiographies women too wrote their stories, not in ink on paper but in various other ways and Penelope scripts her life on cloth, sewing, embroidering the story of a girl, and by implication her life⁶. The act of stitching, slowly, carefully, the choice of subject matter, and the colors and stitches all imply reflection and careful thought, and even as Penelope embroiders her tapestry, we see her reflecting on her own life, giving it meaning and seeing it clearly: the text of Penelope’s life is seen via the texture of her work with textiles as she integrates the text and texture into the textile she works with. The girl in the embroidery, on becoming a maiden, falls head over heels in love

⁵Interestingly, Duffy does not title the poem “Mrs. Ulysses”: Penelope, in Greek myth, has always had a certain importance and it is that importance that Duffy reworks in this poem, titled, simply “Penelope”.

⁶The idea of scripting a life story on a tapestry harks back to the etymology of “text”, “textile” and “texture”, all of which stem from the Latin *textus* and *texere*, indicating to weave, build, fabricate, construct. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “text” as “a book or other written or printed work” from Latin *textus* ‘tissue, literary style’, “textile” as “a type of cloth or woven fabric” from Latin *textilis* and “texture” as “the feel, appearance or consistency of a surface, substance, or fabric” from Latin *textura* ‘weaving’.



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with “heroism’s boy” and lost herself completely in “love, lust, loss, lessons learnt; / then watched him sail away” (70). Even as we read the poem, we see Penelope learning about and understanding the trajectory of her life, the education taking place within the poem in the fact that the speaker learns the lessons of life, as she makes sure the same mistake is not repeated. Thus, when other men come to court her, repeating the pattern of her former life, she knows exactly how to deal with the situation. She “played with time”, wearing the veil of a widow, embroidering in dull “grey threads and brown”, a token of her lack of interest, working by day and undoing her work by night and she “knew which hour of the dark the moon / would start to fray” (71) all indicative of Penelope having learnt and understood, via the events of her own life, what she deems important and meaningful.

The more the speaker works on her embroidery, the more she reflects upon, and learns about life. Her development and maturity is revealed when she speaks clearly about the river in her embroidery which “would never reach the sea”, demonstrating an acceptance of the limitations within which her life is framed. Penelope is not cynical about love or life; she has instead come to know love and life better:

I tricked it. I was picking out
the smile of a woman at the centre
of this world, self-contained, absorbed, content,
most certainly not waiting,
when I heard a far-too-late familiar tread outside the door.
I licked my scarlet thread
and aimed it surely at the middle of the needle’s eye once more. (Duffy, 71)

The speaker has no intention of changing her life, a life that she has shaped through years of waiting and self-education, so that she is now “self-contained, absorbed, content” and the return of her husband is “far-too-late”. The scarlet thread can be read as either a signal of danger or



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destruction or as suggestive of life, power and energy. Penelope's story confirms that for something significant to happen, women need not be dependent on the support of their husbands, and also that serious life lessons can and do take place when men are elsewhere. The Penelope who at the end of poem recognizes Ulysses's tread is someone who is assured and confident, having remade herself as she wove and stitched, making her life and herself anew.

Similarly, several stereotypes are laid bare, and overturned in Duffy's version of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Eurydice is in the long literary tradition of the muse, "Dearest, Beloved, Dark Lady, White Goddess" (Duffy, 59) the figure who is seen in several works by men, the muse to whom dedications and acknowledgments are written. If Frau Freud addresses a gathering of ladies, Eurydice speaks to girls, "Girls, I was dead and down" (58). As Eurydice unfolds her story, we get to know that she does not enjoy this position, for on the pretext of being "His Muse" she was used as a typist, "I'd done all the typing myself" (59). She would rather speak for herself than be:

... trapped in his images, metaphors, similes,
octaves and sextets, quatrains and couplets,
elegies, limericks, villanelles,
histories, myths ... (Duffy, 60)

Here the voice of women who have served as a muse for centuries is encapsulated in the pronouncement of Eurydice. She is of the opinion that "Gods are like publishers, / usually male" (59), thus comparing those in control of the literary canon with the Gods, and drawing an equivalence between the prejudices of both. She argues for such a resemblance (in the form of her simile) because the Gods of the Underworld did not even consider asking her if she would like to go back to the world: she has no say, although she prefers the Underworld: "Like it or not, / I must follow him back to our life" (60). With no help forthcoming from the Gods, Eurydice uses the only weapon left to her. Using her own wit, and her knowledge of Orpheus's vanity, she



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outfoxes Orpheus when she states, “*Orpheus, your poem’s a masterpiece. / I’d love to hear it again...*” (61). Orpheus willingly gives way to flattery and turns back, and that’s when Eurydice “waved once and was gone”. In both “Penelope” and “Eurydice”, Duffy negotiates the figure of the lone woman and shows her readers how women do not always need a man in their lives to be complete and content. The poems undo stereotypes, showing the reader how women might actually be happier on their own, even in the silence of the Underworld so long as they have their peace, howsoever they might define it. The patriarchal insistence that a woman is incomplete without a man in her life is deftly unpicked and we see both Eurydice and Penelope revelling in their single lives, fulfilled and content. Duffy in “Eurydice” trains a critical glance on the ostensible use of women for poetic inspiration and purposes of dedication, while glossing over their reality. Through Eurydice, Duffy shows that women can and should live by their wits, even in the Underworld and this twist in Duffy’s retelling of the myth makes the tale very contemporary. Boland in *Object Lessons* confirms that:

Artistic forms are not static. Nor are they radicalized by aesthetes and intellectuals. They are changed, shifted, denoted into deeper patterns only by the sufferings and self-deceptions of those who use them. By this equation, women should break down barriers in poetry in the same way that poetry will break the silence of women. (Boland, 254)

As we have seen Duffy’s versions of these marriages and romantic relationships in *The World’s Wife* teach the readers to unlearn stereotypical assumptions, not accept one-sided views and instead explore multiple story-lines, and make it possible to imagine different stories liberating both men and women from the stereotypical, the entrenched and the conventional. The characters within the poems learn from their experiences, married or related as they are to major figures from myth and history. The education, whether within the poem or as performed by the poem for us, the readers, is not the traditional schooling that women receive but a process of learning that is self-directed and emerges from their circumstances. As I have demonstrated Duffy uses stories and storytelling to give us new narratives of hitherto marginalised women.



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These narratives are spoken by the characters themselves and as they speak their stories into existence they also re-write our knowledge of them, giving themselves a new identity and validity which comes through in *the stories they tell*. By scripting their stories and by having the readers listen to those stories, Duffy educates us about the possibilities of narrative, which can give a new life to dead voices.

The learning that the many women in the volume demonstrate is seen in every sphere of their lives and as such they become pedagogic characters too, offering their readers, men and women alike, new perspectives on ideas related to marriage and romantic love. The learning and education performed by the poems is not in the actual details as much as in the attitudes they convey, the positing of independent roles and assertive women in the place of the traditional, stereotypical figures.

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