

A Space Created Within: A Non-Subversive Way of Subversion in Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife*

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Abstract—Carol Ann Duffy's poetry collection *The World's Wife* has long aroused critics' interest since its publication in 1999. In this poetry collection, Duffy deconstructs history, mythology and fairy tale, which are all inevitably centered on male domination. The intention of subversion is patent, yet the way of Duffy's subversion, if carefully examined, is non-subversive, which forms a contrast and merits further analysis. Through a carefully-wrapped presentation of pervasive employment of colloquialism, a space created for mutual connection and attachment, as well as an illusion of innocent victims and vicious oppressors, Duffy has cleverly created a non-subversive space within male's voice domain and achieved a subtle balance between two sexes. Different from what critics would normally regard as the traits that define women's writing, Duffy's changing of tacks in *The World's Wife* proves that subversive essence does not necessarily constitute the core of women's writing and a multifaceted relation should be further explored.

Index Terms—Carol Ann Duffy, poetic subversion, *The World's Wife*, women's writing.

I. INTRODUCTION

The highly acclaimed British poet Carol Ann Duffy was appointed British Poet Laureate in 2009. The talented poet is also the first bisexual female poet, at least the first one who openly acknowledged it, to hold the position. Her poetry collection *The World's Wife* has been highly received once published in 1999. 2019 witnesses the 20th year of its publication. In this poetry collection, canonical history, literature, mythology, and fairytale are deconstructed by Duffy's creating of female-dominated voice. The female tone in this poetry collective gives full voice to the world's wives and a unique female voice is well established through the various monologue of long-ignored wives. Their voices together challenge the heroic, manly and superior images of those famous husbands. What their monologue conveys is a humorous and poignant mockery for those unexamined images. *The World's Wife*, as the title of the poetry collection indicates, embodies the wives as a whole integrity. Though their voices may differ from each other, the long-repressed and even distorted images of them are much similar. Now the female cameos are stepping out of the stage curtain and are building their own characters.

After *The World's Wife* was published, *The Times* commented, "Duffy takes a cheeky, subversive, no-nonsense swipe with a dish-clout at the famous men of history and

myth. They don't have a chance in hell of dodging her quick-witted wallop as she relays their stories from their spouse's points of view." [1] What Carol Ann Duffy did in this poetry collection is to move the wives, who were once hidden, subordinate and obscure women in an unseen world, to a stage where they gain their own way to speak inner monologue aloud. The change of position and perspective give readers a reversed way to think about the subtle and tangled tension in the relations between heroic husband and silent wives, or more broadly speaking, the relations between man and woman from a more glorious past to a mundane modern world. *The World's Wife* is thus truly a subversion of a settled and ingrained male-dominated imagination, however, if carefully examined, it is still too early to judge Duffy's style in this poetry collection as subversive. Subversion is more of a result and a final effect, which *The World's Wife* certainly successfully achieved. A subversive essence, however, involves more the poet's ambition to create a new female discourse system that is distinct and powerful enough to shake the foundation of the once ingrained male-focused poetic imagination. Compared to what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar wrote in their highly influential feminist work *The Madwoman in the Attic*, what Carol Ann Duffy presents in *The World's Wife* involves less essentially radical outcry. But it does not mean that Duffy is less conscious than Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Carol Ann Duffy, as a female poet, is certainly aware that there is a long-standing male tradition to be subverted and re-established, to be deconstructed and reconstructed. In the poem *Queen Herod* in this poetry collection, the male 'H' is repetitively capitalized in the verse 'Him. The Husband. Hero. Hunk.' to show a dominating position of the pervasive male voice and male power. What Carol Ann Duffy stirs and subverts is a settled male-centered poetic imagination, but she does not carry out her plan in a subversive way. By doing so, Carol Ann Duffy has created a shared space created within, not without. It is a less noticed and often-ignored, yet important aspect of Duffy's *The World's Wife*. So the following paper will focus on how Carol Ann Duffy achieves a poetic imagination through her clever non-subversive way and what does Duffy convey through her change in tacks.

II. A NON-SUBVERSIVE WAY OF SUBVERSION: A TACK SIMPLE AS THAT

Before entering the non-subversive way of subversion in this poetry collection, I would like to first talk about Carol Ann Duffy's 'tack', a word which appears in *Pygmalion's Bride*, a poem in *The World's Wife*. And here I want to briefly

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compare *Pygmalion's Bride* in *The World's Wife* with another Duffy's earlier famous poem *Standing Female Nude*. The different treats of the closing verses show Duffy's subtly different attitude towards the sexes.

"So I changed tack/ grew warm, like candle wax/ kissed back/ was soft, was pliable/ began to moan/ got hot, got wild/ arched, coiled, writhed/ begged for his child/ and at the climax/ screamed my head off-/ all an act." "And haven't seen him since/ Simple as that." (*Pygmalion's Bride*)

"When it's finished/ he shows me proudly, lights a cigarette. I say/ Twelve francs and get my shawl. It does not look like me." [2] (*Standing Female Nude*)

In *Standing Female Nude*, Duffy's tone is very close to a kind of cold sarcasm. Yet in *Pygmalion's Bride*, it can be captured that there is a shifting tone. To use the bride's words, the bride 'changed tack' and the small change points at a different direction. Here Duffy as a internalized voice is the one who speaks for Pygmalion's bride. Obviously, it is not only the wife who has changed her tack, the woman who manipulates wives' voice, Carol Ann Duffy, has also cleverly changed her tack. In the poem *Pygmalion's Bride*, it is easy to see that how manly power and the desire for control is melting down just because of a simple turn in her tact. I mention above that Duffy as a female poet does not want to ambitiously turn the man's world upside down, what she intends to achieve is a space created within the man's kingdom. It is a space created not in a violent and hot-blooded way, but in a mildly sarcastic and humorous way. Different from the negative aggressive tone in *Standing Female Nude*, "Simple as that" conspicuously reveals the gaining autonomy of the bride. Instead of being manipulated by the dominant man, Pygmalion's bride takes her own action to disintegrate man's existence and starts to manipulate. "Pygmalion, an early worshipper in the long tradition of poetic and artistic idealization of the feminine, cannot cope with the fleshy, sexual reality: simple as that." [3] And Wainwright defined it as one of the victories of liberation won by Duffy's 'wives'. The bride, instead of standing up and launching a feminist blockbuster, she cleverly changes her tack, and a simple turn in strategy brings back what she wants. The case is same with Duffer herself, she, like the bride, adopts a more effective, non-subversive tact to achieve her poetic goal. Duffy does not present her readers with a radical awakening of feminist consciousness, but she surely provides a feasible, quick-witted and humorous alternative.

A. Colloquialism as a Way of Non-subversive Subversion

Carol Ann Duffy's 'wife' is undoubtedly a challenge for a man-dominated literary imagination, but the challenge is built on a non-subversive way, which may appear to be paradoxical. The poem collection contains subversion in its essence, but not its appearance. By talking about appearance, I firstly refer to colloquial language style in this poem collection, which can be immediately captured by the first reading of the poetry collection. A pervasive colloquialism is purposely used by Duffy to create a sense of dailiness. Simple common words, straightforward depiction, and

non-metaphorical verses constitute this poem collection. Duffy especially prefers short verses and a compact combination of them, which also correspond to a trivial daily trait and suit well with a pervasive colloquialism in this poetry collection.

Poetic discourse, just as any other kind of discourse, is about an establishment which is closely and inevitably connected to power, tradition and right. A male-centered poetic imagination is established by reinforcing male discourse through generations and thus remains firmly in the center of a literary canon. Yet when the chance to establish a distinct, if not powerful and determined, feminist voice is at Duffy's fingertips, Duffy easily lets it go. She does not intend to create a new discourse, instead, she mocks the established and ready discourse by the rich use of colloquialism in her poems. Carol Ann Duffy abandons the chance to create a forceful female discourse and turns to a mundane colloquial style, which indicates that in this poetry collection, Duffy chooses a daily scene not a well-designed arena for her 'wives'. The male characters, who always symbolizes a traditional, canonical and authoritative poetic imagination, have their own more grand voices and speeches. As a way to challenge a well-established male poetic tradition, Duffy firstly changes her "tack" by using a casual and colloquial tone, which is seemingly an exact way of women daily talk. Besides, the colloquial and casual tone, though far away from aggressive and radical, successfully creates an ironic tone toward tradition male voice. By using the colloquialism in *The World's Wife*, Carol Ann Duffy naturally presents different aspects of domestic images of 'wives' and takes it as a tool to create enormous irony. This is patently one of Duffy's clever tacks to subvert male poetic imagination in a non-subversive way.

B. Space Created for Mutual Connection and Attachment

The world's wife, as the title indicates, is also the wife's world, a maternal world which does not sit absolutely opposed to a man's world. The roles of wives and husbands and their subtle tension in between are not opposite to each other in a simple and clear way. Instead, the complex facets hidden between the lines are what Duffy targets at. The opening poem in *The World's Wife* can be one of the proofs. In the opening poem named *Little Red Cap*, Duffy shows how male influence female's growth. Duffy once confessed that the re-written fairytale of the little red cap is actually based on her personal experience.

'The wolf, I knew, would lead me deep into the woods, away from home, to a dark tangled thorny place/ lit by the eyes of owls.' (from *Little Red Cap*) The male wolf there represents potential danger and threat, but in this very peril rises an inspiring driving force, which transforms the little red cap from a vulnerable into a mature, self-conscious and daring woman. Now the little red cap can 'took an axe to a willow to see how it wept', 'took an axe to a salmon to see how it leapt', and eventually 'took an axe to the wolf as he slept, one chop, scrotum to throat'. The series of action is carried out smoothly with determination and no hesitation can be captured through the compact and direct verses. Wolf is the one who plays the decisive role in changing the little

red cap. The killing at the ending, which is seemingly cruel and merciless, signifies the final coming of age of little red cap, in another sense, the coming of age of Duffy as a female poet. Poetry is the reason why little red cap (also Duffy herself) is attracted by the wolf. (male poet) ‘What big ears he had! What big eyes he had! What teeth!’ The admiration towards the wolf, the incarnation of a mature male poet here can be easily perceived. The coming of age of the little red cap has inseparable connection with the important male character “wolf”, a word that both indicates danger and vigor.

In the second poem of ‘*The Devil’s Wife*’ series named *Medusa*, verses like ‘I wrote to him every day in our private code. I thought in twelve, fifteen, we’d be out on the open road.’ and ‘If the Devil was gone then how could this be hell?’ clearly present Medusa as a common young girl who is hurt and tortured by the failure of a romantic relationship, just like any other girls in the world. Actually, those verses are so heartfelt and sincere that at the same time, they render certain doubt. Will such sincere expression of attachment and affection for the man, together with the vulnerable image of a depressed girl, undermine the overall sarcastic and taunting tone of the whole poetry collection? The answer is no. In fact, by introducing multi-dimensional emotion expression, Duffy succeeds in giving more density and complexity to her poetry collection.

C. An illusion of Innocent Victims and Vicious Oppressors

Antony Rowland once commented that *The World’s Wife* “appears to critique men from the perspective of a ‘first-wave’ feminist of the late 1960s and early 1970s, in which ‘woman’ is opposed to an oppressive series of patriarchs”[4], which certainly captures the anti-repression spirit of the poetry collection, yet what Carol Ann Duffy did in *The World’s Wife* goes beyond the simple opposition between the role of innocent female victims who finally gain the chance to speak out their trauma and the role of vicious, arbitrary and patriarchal males who try to wipe out their wives’ identities. There is an illusion that *The World’s Wife* pictures an opposition between a group of innocent female victims and vicious male oppressors. Such opposition does exist, but it just a part of the whole picture that *The World’s Wife* presents. In fact, Carol Ann Duffy does not purposely choose to portray all the wives as purely innocent victims under a patriarchal repression, which merits our attention. In the poem *Mrs Midas*, Susanna Braund commented that “she is certainly prosecuting a feminist agenda in imagining the unspoken stories and perspectives of the invisible women in these myths. But at the same time, she has the double perspective already observed in Atwood’s ‘Siren Song’: however much we might sympathize with her plight, Mrs. Midas is not actually a generous person.”[4] Susanna Braund also expressed that “while I would not dissent from Horner’s reading of TWW as an active engagement ‘with a tradition of women’s writing and thought’ with ‘a heavy emphasis on speech, silence and finding one’s voice as a woman’, individual poems such as ‘Mrs Midas’ and ‘Mrs Aesop’, which ends with a threat of castration, present nastier, narrower, more selfish female voices.”[4] Jane Satterfield similarly commented on this poem collection, “In a

progression of voices from Little Red Cap to Demeter, daughter to mother and a host of roles in between, Duffy’s speakers are both wise and wise-cracking women, sometimes cynical, scornful, or raging at the folly of their men, at other times blunt and bawdy.”[5]

Duffy certainly does not gloss over man’s infamous deeds, but it does not mean that Duffy would choose to create a perfect innocent image of the woman. This is a point that is often neglected when it comes to the analysis of Duffy’s poem. The poetry collection focuses more on women’s self-consciousness and self-integrity, not on a simple image as represses innocent victims. And it is about more accurate and multi-layer portraits of themselves as well as remain true to the inner world of wives.

By balancing the poetic image of male and female, Duffy seeks to create and extend a space within the domain of male-centered imagination, and this is also a part of her changing tactics. If Carol Ann Duffy merely wants to subvert a male-dominated world, be it historical, mythological or modern daily in a easily recognizable way, she could have spent less time creating the not-so-bright side of those repressed wives, or completely wiped out the beneficial influence that male may exert on female, or ignored the attachment between two sexes. But Duffy does not, she writes all of them.

III. A BOUNDARY OF WOMEN’S WRITING

Hélène Cixous firmly writes, “Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reason, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement.” (qtd. in Emily A. Holmes) [6] But the problem is that almost from the day that the term women’s writing is coined, it has become more of a label than a solid branch of literary studies. More dispute than coherence has emerged and more problem than solution has appeared since women’s writing has found its way into literary analysis.

Elena Theodorakopoulos admits that “Categorizing writing by women is a tricky task. The prejudice that women’s writing is, on the whole, small-scale, domestic or private, is frequently denied, and just as frequently upheld, even in the most unlikely quarters.”[7] Elena Theodorakopoulos also asked two questions in *Women’s Writing and the Classical Tradition* “Almost forty years later, are there still boundaries to transgress for women writers, as we assert in our title?” and “why insist on treating women’s writing as a distinctive category at all?”[8]

At the same time, almost inevitably, women’s writing is regarded by many, as a sheer opposite to men’s writing. One of the quick ways to analyze women’s writing in literary studies is to put it into the place of opposition. Normally in the immediately-established opposition would contain the tension with whatever aspects, be it

political, economic or cultural, and they are inevitably related to the dimension of patriarch or male-domination. The analysis of women's writing is thus somehow tinted with a bitter struggle in a predetermined way. Antony Rowland explicitly pointed out that Coral Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife* is a poem collection rejecting the male. "If The Other Country and Mean Time both elide and perpetuate masculinity in the ambiguous gender identities of the amorous subjects, then, to twist the end of 'Telephoning Home', *The World's Wife* makes it quite plain that this is a woman speaking, and she does not tolerate errant men." [9] However, *The World's Wife*, as I have argued above, is not a total rejection of the male world or a deliberately designed subversive attack into male's voice dominance.

And when it comes to the identity of a female poet, it may involve more complexity. Carol Ann Duffy has a label as a lesbian poet, so naturally, some critics try to establish a coherent lesbian poetics in her poems. Though in *The World's Wife* there are depictions related to lesbian eroticism like 'the slow caress of her hand on the back of my neck', 'her bite at the fruit of my lip' (from *Mrs Tiresias*), still I think that lesbian poetics is too large a term to be properly used here. Besides, the legitimacy of lesbian poetics is still in question. Does lesbian poets naturally share a common poetics that is based on their sexual orientation rather than their poetic goals? And another two questions to ask is that how critics coalesce the category of women's writing and lesbian poetics, and to what extent is such coalescence productive. These questions unsolved, the critic of women's writing seems to stand upon a shaky ground, for the identity of women themselves still remains a mystery, not to the writers, but to critics who are only too eager to establish a clear boundary within the changeable category. Just as Susan Wiseman comments in *Conspiracy and Virtue* that there should be "a concern to develop an analytical method suitable to the complex representations on view, rather than a desire to fit them into an overarching narrative" [10] In Duffy's case here, once literary critics decide to label Carol Ann Duffy as a lesbian poet, they are at risk for negating non-lesbian part in her poems, which is perhaps more essential and merits more of our due attention. The dilemma of dealing with Duffy's works is also the same dilemma that women's writing faces today. From my point of view, literary studies on women's writing should take on multidimensional perspectives instead of continuously focusing on the simple opposition between two sexes, for it is not that conducive to solving the real-existing problems. Duffy's changing of tacks hidden in her poetry collection *The World's Wife* proves that subversive essence does not necessarily constitute the core of women's writing and a multifaceted relation should be explored further. But this aspect is often strangely ignored by many.

IV. CONCLUSION

Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife* is not a traditionally ambitious poetry collection in that it does not aim at carrying

out a total subversive attack in order to create a new and aggressive female establishment. It shows, instead, how wives exist in inseparable relation to their husbands. Though it mocks, parodies and taunts, yet Duffy does not firmly cut off the bond between the two sexes. Instead, she acknowledges and embraces the opposition and connection at the same time.

Though it is undeniable that in *The World's Wife*, Duffy successfully deconstructs those famed men's sketches by cleverly taunting, mocking and parodying those established, yet not examined imagination, she actually aims at a bigger picture in which the tension is more multi-faceted and takes on traits that need to be further explored. It seems that Duffy, instead of directly walking out of the male-dominated kingdom without hesitation, tries to cleverly create a space within it. Not aiming at constructing a powerful 'wife's world', Duffy has her own "tact". As is mentioned above, Duffy does not intend to launch a war or fight between husbands and wives or, between male and female. Duffy admits the connection exists. Instead of subverting the man's kingdom and myth, Duffy extends the space within it. Not eager to replace a man-made myth and history with a vigorous female power, which Duffy surely can achieve if she desires in her poems, Duffy chooses to extend the space within a male history. Duffy's insightful and unique way of looking into the women's world, her clever tack of changing perspectives, balancing images as well as creating space, and her poetic talent altogether make her a lasting literary figure with unique charm. As Deryn Rees-Jones comments, Duffy constantly brings "an eclectic range of influences to bear on the contemporary poetry scene." [11]

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