"He looked at me ... My God. His eyes were eyes to die for.": A Feminist Theological Reading of Carol Ann Duffy’s *The World’s Wife*

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Introduction

Carol Ann Duffy, the only daughter of a Roman Catholic working-class family, started writing poems at the age of eleven, and published her first pamphlet when she was nineteen years old. In 2009 she was the first woman to be elected Poet Laureate in Great Britain, after having been overlooked once in the past, allegedly because of her sexual orientation. Ann Duffy is openly bisexual, which has been the focus of both media and critics over the years, and has often served as the basis of the interpretation of her work. Nevertheless, she is considered one of the most popular poets in the United Kingdom and has managed to gain both popularity and the respect from her contemporary peers.

Duffy has published many poetry collections, and according to Paterson & Simic her “simultaneously accessible and dense poetry is a small miracle of stylistic balance, and a hugely influential model for many younger poets” (Paterson & Simic 31). Deryn considers Duffy’s poetry as “intelligent without being exclusive … humorous without being glib, direct without being reductive” (Deryn 4). Her poetry collections and especially her collection *The World’s Wife* have been frequently studied within the theoretical framework of feminism. Lanone supports that in *The World’s Wife* Duffy “adopts a post-modern feminist stance with a vengeance” (3), while Porée places her between the poets who subject “the entire body of Western myths underlying male domination to a … revision by way of irony” (5). According to Thorn, Duffy “builds up what amounts to an orchestra of individual women’s voices that result in a collective female voice” (2), by inventing “none of the stories that form the basis of the poems” (2), and Horner argues that Duffy succeeds in both entertaining her readers, and alerting them “to the cultural and social implications of a philosophical legacy that has helped privilege
the narrative of the world’s husband for far too long” (Michelis & Rowland117). Michelis & Rowland further argue that Duffy “demonstrates to what extent every story and every discourse achieves social intelligibility by silencing other versions” (27), in this instance, the feminine.

Thus, most approaches to Duffy’s work that exist as said have been a feminist reading of poetry, focusing on the portrayal of women within the theoretical framework of feminism. As Lanone argues, Duffy’s work reveals an “intense awareness of gendered cultural constructs” (2), and in her work *The World’s Wife* the “feminist dramatic monologue subverts His/story into Herstory, addressing archetypal tales and Greek mythology as cultural constructs” (4). However, little attention has been paid to the religious elements in Duffy’s work, something that Duffy herself has recognized. Referring to her collection *The World’s Wife* she states in one of her interviews: “Although the book has been called a feminist manifesto, and I am feminist and it is feminist, my aim was larger than that” (Wood). This essay will therefore focus on the centrality of religion in Duffy’s work, and will argue that her poems constitute an arena where religion is redefined and female experience and theology are reconciled. Her work thus will be examined within the theoretical framework of feminist theology. Six representative poems from Duffy’s fifth collection *The World’s Wife*, which was published in 1999, have been selected for the analysis: “Pope Joan”, “Queen Herod”, “Pilate’s Wife”, “Salome”, “Delilah”, and “Mrs Lazarous”. All of these poems have in common that they reconcile specifically female experience with religious experience.

All poems of *The World’s Wife* present a female character, usually the wife or the partner of many well-known men from history or mythology. In the poems under
focus, “Delilah”, “Salome”, “Pilate’s wife” and “Pope Joan” depict actual historical figures, “Mrs Lazarous” the wife of a biblical figure, and “Queen Herod” the female version of a known male one. The analysis that follows examines these poems in two separate sections: their portrayal of love and sexuality, and their portrayal of motherhood respectively, within the theoretical framework of feminist theology.

Feminist Theology

Feminist theology represents a relatively new branch of theology. There are many theoretical approaches within feminist theology, and even though not all feminist theologians’ goals and interpretations coincide, they do share a common commitment to feminism, rejecting patriarchy and renouncing sexism in religion. This is claimed by feminist theologians to be an imperative need, the only alternative, since theology, as argued, can be viewed as an arena where the female has been silenced for centuries:

Feminist theologians complain that all Christian theology, up to now, has been done by men and for men. Consequently it has ignored women’s experience or else has distorted it. This ‘male’ writing of Theology has had damaging consequences for women, who must now turn around and play a major role in reshaping theological expression. Many women now insist that women’s experience, as they define it, must be the model for any future Christian Theology. (Johnston 233)

Thus, according to Johnston, theology has until now expressed only the male point of view and experience, and at instances where the female experience is presented, it is
‘distorted’, that is in line with the way the males believe it is supposed to be expressed. Feminist Theology concentrates on a ‘reshaping’ of the existing interpretations of theology, which, as written by males, include only their own sex’s insights. Feminist Theologians propose female interpretations, female insights which include the women’s experiences, in the way the women themselves define them. As Duffy states in one of her interviews “the main change is from male to female views of things: that’s what you say, but what does she say?” (Wood).

Within the feminist theology movement there is a cluster of separate movements supporting different views and aiming to different goals. One of the most prominent researchers whose work has influenced later theories is Saiving. Saiving is one of the first feminists to question theology’s traditional tendency to “identify sin with self-assertion and love with selflessness” (Saiving 26). In her essay “The Human Situation: A Feminine View”, she criticizes the way sin is traditionally viewed by male theologians (Fulkerson 212). Floyed-Thomas & Pinn, commenting on Saiving’s essay, argue that in order to reshape theology, two crucial points must be taken into consideration:

First, the essay basically amounts to an argument that experience matters when constructing theology: Saiving insisted that male experience skewed theological constructs, but theology required attention to women’s experience as well. Second, she showed the significance of this claim in her analysis of concepts of sin and love in the theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Anders Nygren. Pride was a sin more fitting for males, she argued. In contrast to self-aggrandizement, women’s sin is more likely to be loss of or lack of self. (Floyed-Thomas & Pinn 212).
Saiving’s proposal is that women’s experience differs to that of the men in theology, and that it subsequently leads to a different reading of ‘love’ and ‘sin’. “Theological doctrines of love” she argues “view the human condition from the male standpoint” (Saiving 27). The male view within the Western civilization identifies “sin with pride, will-to-power, exploitation, self-assertiveness”, drawing its notions from the contemporary “man’s dilemma” (Saiving 35). Women’s “specific sexuality” (36), and “profound experience of self-transcending love” (37) experienced through maternity is disregarded. Since love is viewed differently, it is thus inferred that “the temptations of woman as woman are not the same as the temptations of man as man” (Saiving 37). Suggestions for the reading of ‘sin’ for women are “triviality, distractibility, diffuseness … in short underdevelopment or negation of the self” (Saiving 37). Consequently, Saiving challenges the male theological overview that the woman “has no right to ask anything for herself but must submit without qualification to the strictly feminine role” (39) where “she will try and struggle those impulses” and “desires”’ as “sin or temptation to sin (39). Moreover, she attempts to warn women to not “set ourselves … to rear our daughter in the older way … without encouraging them to be independent, differentiated, free human beings” (39).

To summarize, Saiving concentrates on the significance of female experience in reshaping theology, and argues that the lack of the female point of view in theology has led to a distorted version of female love, female sexuality, maternity and the raising of daughters and therefore also, sin. All of these aspects are closely related to the representation of the female body.
The female body plays an important role in classifying female experience within religion. As Cooey argues, the naked female body draws certain connotations within theology. The church, he supports, has moved:

...to a dominating identification of female nakedness with sin and evil through the figure of Eve. In short, the first seventeen centuries of Christendom reflect the gradual cultural construction of the concept "woman" as synecdoche for all that is material and therefore finite, as this is associated with evil and death (Cooey 84).

The “female nakedness” (Cooey 84) has been therefore associated within Christianity for centuries with sin, through the figure of Eve. As female theologians suggest, sin and evil do not always have to be associated with the naked body as a whole, according to Althaus Reid. As she argues “Women’s eyes represent the lightness of what is supposed to be women’s knowledge, circumscribed around issues of seduction and subjection” (45). Female eyes alone thus, seem sometimes capable of carrying the weight and the desires of the whole body, mirroring the female inner feelings. A controversy though, lies here in the way the female eyes are viewed. According to Althaus Red, “from all the sense and imaginary of a fragmented woman’s body the eyes have been perceived as the most innocuous because they are the religious authorized spare parts of a woman in any patriarchal society” (38). The female eyes, therefore, are very significant in every religion, since they constitute the gateway to the female body and mind, the link to their selves. In certain cultures though, it is argued that the female eyes “are always lowered in confrontation with men, and never keep their gaze into men’s eyes unless a woman is an
easy, indecent woman (sexual deviant)” (Althaus Red 38). A female look into a man’s eyes is, in this way, considered by males as a sign of a sexual call, transmitting a particular message from the rest of the female body, which is viewed negatively in society’s (men’s) eyes. Nakedness and female sexuality are, thus, given a negative association. They are unwanted, and their display is to be avoided.

Religion has also played a dominant role in the creation and reinforcement of certain ideas around motherhood. If sin has been for centuries linked to Eve, motherhood has been for centuries associated with Mary. It is interesting, however, that Mary can be easily characterised as "the icon of a no-body” (46), according to Althaus Red.

To start with Mary is to start with an idea, a gas-like substance, a myth of a woman without a vagina which discloses in a hilarious way the fact that half of humanity has been constructed around ideas of ghostly simulacras. As a woman theologian myself, I need to struggle against the idea of using ‘she’ for the Virgin Mary. The Virgin Mary is not a woman but a simulacra in which the process of making ideologies and what Marx calls ‘mystical connections’ is exemplified (Marx 1976:43). It is not only that our idea of a woman who does not reflect the human experience of womanhood in the least has been made a narrative of authority, but this ‘thing’ called the Virgin Mary has interfered with other political and social conceptualizations (Althaus Red 46).
Even though Mary has been the symbol of motherhood throughout the Christian world, the fact that she cannot be representative of the female experience of motherhood has been thoroughly disregarded. Females have been urged to identify with a female who has not experienced the whole range of the female experiences. They have been urged to identify with a female who even though has not displayed any sexuality and human desires, has been serving, in religion, as the role model of what a woman should be and act like for many women. It is imperative thus to redefine female experience and motherhood to a more earthly perspective, that corresponds more to reality, and represents females in an objective way. Duffy’s poems constitute such an example.

**The World’s Wife: the Portrayal of Love and Sexuality**

In Duffy’s “Pilate’s Wife” the female sexuality is manifest and celebrated throughout the poem. When Christ comes to Jerusalem and the Pilate’s wife, a ‘bored’ housewife goes with her maid to see the spectacle out of curiosity, Christ looks at her. “He looked at me” writes Duffy in “Pilate’s Wife”, “I mean he looked at me. My God. / His eyes were eyes to die for” (10-11). This encounter insinuates an energy, a connection between Christ and the woman, whom Christ from all people present chooses to address his look to. And by this look “the generous recognition of Christ’s extraordinary charismatic presence”, as Horner argues, takes place (Michelis & Rowland 112). When Pilate’s wife and Christ look each other intensely in the eyes, this deed with its sexual implications is attributed a positive connotation. Differently, Christ would not return such a look.
Sexuality is present again later in the poem, and this time it is connected with an effort to save Christ. “The night before the trial” narrates Duffy’s Pilate’s wife, “I dreamt of him” (13). Dreams and visions are a recurrent subject in biblical accounts, often bearing a prophetic meaning, a revelation. “I woke up”, the Pilate’s wife continues, “sweating, sexual, terrified” (16). The physical attraction is thus evident, and because of it, Pilate’s wife decides to act and save Christ, sexuality working as a link in this way, connecting women and church spiritually. “Leave him alone. I sent a warning note” (17), she says. Pilate though, arguably with apathy, averts his wife’s eyes and washes his hands. By this, the author offers a different explanation of why Pilates saved Barabbas’ life instead of Christ’s. He was driven by his personal feelings of jealousy, or spite perhaps, when seeing his wife’s display of concern. In this way, Pilate’s wife, acknowledging Christ’s charismatic personality with the guidance of her sexuality, opposes her people and results in being regarded as one of the people who tried to save Christ. Her sexuality is presented as the means of bringing herself closer to the church.

The last line of the poem offers another dimension to Duffy’s interpretation of the Biblical event. Pilate’s wife asks “Was he God?” And she replies: “Of course not. Pilate believed he was” (24). Her opinion seems to oppose directly the common belief that Christ was a prophet. What she sees or perhaps what she is led to ‘see’ by the eye contact and the dream she had, is the human side of him. Christ chooses to reveal to a woman his human, more intimate side, where sexual thoughts, and the connection between a man and a woman are welcomed. Apart from ‘legitimizing’ female sexuality, Duffy draws from the female experience in this poem, and attempts an effort to reconcile
female identity and religion. It was men who crucified Christ, but it was a woman who tried to save him.

In “Delilah”, female sexuality is met once again, this time explicitly. “We were lying in bed” (2) narrates Delilah, discussing very openly her intimate moments with Samson. “He fucked me again/ until he was sore” (22-23) she continues her description, suggesting that even though she is not married to Samson, female sexuality is something legitimate, and decent, that is, something that can be openly discussed. It is something that bears no deeper implications for society than what it really is, and thus something that there is no reason to hide.

Moreover, the gender conflict and common notion that “men are wronged by treacherous women” (Michelis & Rowland 26) is seriously questioned. Delilah is not presented as in the conventional tale, that is, as a dangerous woman who used her sexuality to betray Samson, in exchange for money. On the contrary, she is responding to a plea of his. “Teach me, he said … / how to care” (1, 3). This sounds like an unconventional request from a man only known as a brave warrior. When Delilah asks what he means, he explains how he is able to “rip out the roar / from the throat of a tiger” (7-8) and commit many violent deeds, since “There’s nothing I [he] fear” (7-8). But that seems to be the easy part for Samson. What he regrets is that “I [he] cannot be gentle, or loving, or tender. / I [he has] have to be strong. / What is the cure?” (19-21), he asks. This suggests that he feels trapped in society’s expectations according to which he is expected “to be strong” (20), while what he wants is to change, to be able to “care” (3) which is difficult for him. Samson thus asks for Delilah’s help. Listening to Delilah’s version of the story, the readers learn that Delilah “does him a favor by helping him to get in touch
with his feminine side” (Michelis & Rowland 26), and as Horner argues the readers watch “the warrior seeking the gift of intimacy” (Michelis & Rowland 113). Delilah is viewed in this way as a person with altruistic feelings, benevolent, and devoid of selfishness, and moreover as a strong person who does not hesitate to act.

Samson, on the other hand, is depicted as having realized his male identity’s flaws and wishes to reject violence. In his mind some of the female characteristics are superior to his own (“but I cannot be gentle, or loving, or tender” (19)), and the lack of them constitute a weakness. The connotation that the word “loving” (19) has for Samson incites questions. The readers view him having sex with Delilah, and at the same time questioning his ability to love, —at least in the way a woman can love, which he arguably envies. Female identity and the ability to love are thus elevated compared to the male, and the female experience (Delilah’s) is highlighted.

In Duffy’s “Salome”, the stereotype that men are wronged and betrayed by women is once again challenged. Additionally, Duffy challenges the notion that female sexuality and seductiveness are used for personal reasons. According to Frey, in “Salome”, Duffy “gives a strong and autonomous voice to the traditionally silenced female Other, presents her as an independent subject, and a symbol of subversive and transgressive femininity” (10). This feminist reading of “Salome” can be also linked to the religious reading of this poem. The readers learn that Salome wakes up with a stranger, judging from the head, sleeping next to her. She does not remember who he is, but “what did it matter?” (5). Waking up beside a stranger is something she had “done [it] before” (1). Salome’s sexual life is thus presented as a normal, rational way of life, with no further implications, that is with no hidden motives to take advantage of her sexuality.
She then studies the face next to her, she likes what she sees, and kisses his mouth “that obviously knew / how to flatter” (10-11). Salome is, in this way, presented not as the seducer of John the Baptist, but as the seduced, attributing to John the Baptist the initiative of their relationship. Feeling hungry she orders breakfast, and while contemplating her way of life and how it is time to change it—arguably into something more meaningful—she decides to find out “who’d come like a lamb to the slaughter” (31). With surprise she discovers that the head in her bed is without a body, just lying on a platter. She has no recollection thus of what has happened to John the Baptist, nor does she show any sign of premeditation. Salome is therefore depicted as using her sexuality for her own interest, that is for her pleasure, and not having planned John the Baptist’s murder.

The choice of the phrase “who’d come like a lamb to the slaughter” (31) is interesting. The lamb, in the Christian religion, was often used in sacrifices and offered to God as a gift. When John the Baptist is compared to a lamb, the connotation is that he was sacrificed as a gift to God, which means that Salome offered him to God. Salome’s deeds can be interpreted, in this way, through a different prism. Her sexuality is not an instrument of the devil, used for the fall of virtuous men, but a God-given charisma, that exists to serve Him. Female identity and sexuality are thus reinstated in the eyes of religion. All skills, including sexuality, are displayed as being attributed by Him and used by Him, for the reasons only He knows.

In other words, by viewing the female experience in this poem, the myth is reversed and John the Baptist is shown as the agent, the seducer of Salome. Salome wakes up not remembering who John the Baptist is, or what has happened to him, leaving
doubts about the conventional version and the motives of Salome’s deed. Instead, it can be suggested that she has been driven to kill John the Baptist in her sleep by a higher force (God). By this, religion is redefined, female powers are viewed as attributed by God to serve Him, and the female experience is brought to light and reconciled with religion.

In “Mrs Lazarous” female needs and desires and their dominant role in a woman’s life are highlighted. In what is considered to be one of the best known miracles of Christ—Lazarous resurrecting on the fourth day of his death—the female, human side of the story is privileged, and the human consequences of his resurrection are highlighted by Duffy. Lazarous’ wife, after having “grieved” and “wept” (1) realises how by the passing of time “he was going away from me [her]” (14), and “he was vanishing / to the small zero held by the gold of my [her] ring” (19-20). It can be argued here that Duffy implicitly criticises the importance of marriage. The love and the strong feelings she once had thus were fading away, and the wounds were healed, “Till his name was no longer a certain spell for his face” (16), and until “his scent went from the house” (18). When “he was gone” (21), Mrs Lazarous saw “my [her] arm on the arm of a schoolteacher” (22). Mrs Lazarous is thus portrayed as a woman with concrete needs and desires. She loved her husband considerably, and grieved for his loss, but she cannot live on just with her memories. She has physical needs, and since her husband is dead, they are fulfilled by another man: a man who does not need to be a resurrected follower of Christ, but a simple schoolteacher. In this way, Duffy shows the inevitable flow of life and relationships. Once a beloved is lost, there is grief and strong feelings for the dead person. But since time heals all wounds, slowly both the feelings and the beloved one’s recollection fade away, and another person replaces the gap the beloved one leaves
behind. Moreover, Duffy argues that humans cannot survive only on ‘higher’ feelings, on beliefs and memories. They need a ‘down to earth’ life, and human love.

Apart from Mrs Lazarous’ personal experience with the resurrection, Duffy also refers to Lazarous’ experience that is equally tragic. Once he is resurrected, he sees that another man has taken his place, and his face fills with “horror” (36). Even though he has come back to life, he realizes that his life cannot be the same. He has a “cuckold name”, he is “disinherited”, and he is “out of his time” (40). As Duffy herself notes:

The source of his horror is partly at her having a new man, partly the trauma of being raised from the dead; so it’s the changed state he finds himself in and the changed state of his world. So to him it looks like a nightmare. He’s back but nothing is the same. He’s “out of his time”, his time ended when he died (Wood).

In this sense, his resurrection has little meaning to him, since his wife has moved on. His resurrection passes almost unnoticed compared to her absence. A life without the female companion and experience of the person he loves is not a real life. Lazarous cannot take comfort just in a miracle. He needs his private needs and desires to be fulfilled, in the face of his wife.

To summarize, all of the poems depict female sexuality as natural, human, and welcomed. In “Pilate’s Wife” sexuality is presented as a link to religion, welcomed and exercised even by Christ. Both in “Delilah” and in “Salome”, the myths that female sexuality is the devil’s instrument and that women betray men are challenged, and in “Mrs Lazarous” sexuality is presented as a basic human need that must be naturally satisfied.
The World’s Wife: the Portrayal of Motherhood

In “Pope Joan” the experience of motherhood is presented as the strongest link to religion, and the most explicit proof of the existence of God. The story is told by the female, Joan Pope herself, the legendary woman who, disguised as a man, managed after years of study to be elected Pope of Rome. In a kind of confession, Pope Joan, addressing herself to other women, describes her experiences of being the Pope. Duffy highlights another version of history, and reveals what Pope Joan’s story could have been if it had not been interpreted solely from the male point of view. In the poem, Pope Joan gives her life’s account, and concludes beyond doubt that being a female brings someone closer to God than being a Pope, thus the female experience is more valuable.

So I tell you now,
daughters or brides of the Lord,
that the closest I felt
to the power of God
was the sense of a hand
lifting me, flinging me down
lifting me, flinging me down
as my baby pushed out
from between my legs

where I lay in the road
in my miracle,
not a man or a pope at all (19-30).
By being the only woman, until then, having experienced both being a Pope and a mother, she reveals the triviality of being the Pope compared to the importance of being a mother. According to the poem she reaches that conclusion after having “learnt to transubstantiate / unleavened bread” (2-3), to swing “the burning frankincense” (4), of “blessing and blessing the air” (9), and of living in the Vatican. None of these tasks can compare to the birth of a child. The “miracle” (29) thus is not to be “a man or a pope” (30), to bless “the air” (9) and to “transubstantiate / unleavened bread” (2-3), but to be able to bear children, that is, to be a woman. Giving birth is the task that brings someone closer to God, writes Duffy, and by this she draws the focus to human, female experience. Thus religion, and belief, are linked to people’s personal experiences, to their private encounter with God, and not to priesthood and the public sphere, no matter what other people claim, and as Duffy writes “I came to believe / that I did not believe a word” (17-18). Moreover, the “miracle” (29) consists of a gift which is the exclusive privilege of women. It is God-given, but exercised by humans, and women only. By this, religion is redefined by Duffy as the private and not the social encounter with God. The female experience and its key role in God-given miracles is drawn into focus, and elevated beyond any experience that men can be made privy to. Motherhood is linked directly to religion, and female experience is considered as of the highest importance.

In “Queen Herod” the Massacre of the Innocents, one of the most terrifying deeds in the Bible is attributed to motherhood, and to the love a Queen displays for her daughter. The story is presented slightly different at the beginning, at the point where, in the conventional version, three Kings arrive at King Herod’s palace when Christ is born. In Duffy’s version it is “three Queens” (2) and not three Kings. Once Herod is asleep,
they “asked to see her [the Queen]” (19), and the King, they offer gifts to her newborn daughter, which include not the materialistic conventional ones offered to Christ, but “Grace” (25), “Strength” (26) and “Happiness” (29), and warn her to “watch … for a star in the east” (31), which will signify the birth of a boy who will take her daughter. The three Queens’ aim is thus to inform King Herod’s wife of the imminent danger of losing her daughter by the new King. Queen Herod, determined to allow “no man” (46) to “make her [daughter] shed one tear” (47) gives the order for “each mother’s son” (76) to be killed.

The story of “Queen Herod” has been interpreted as a feminine manifesto of “an alternative, female, logic for Herod’s murder of all male children” (Michelis & Rowland 111). According to Horner, this poem “marks both the beginning and end of a matriarchy” (Michelis & Rowland 112). The line “No man, I swore, will make her shed one tear” (46-47) signifies “its own optimism and confidence in modern women’s ability to protect each other from masculine exploitation and abuse” (Michelis & Rowland 112), that is, the belief that women have the power to protect themselves and their daughters. The last lines of the poem close this circle.

We do our best,
wed Queens, we mothers,
mothers of Queens.

We wade through blood
For our sleeping girls.
We have daggers for eyes.
Behind our lullabies,
the hooves of terrible horses
thunder and drum. (91-99)

As Horner notes, “in historical retrospect—the reader knows that the birth of the Messiah will usher in a long era of Pauline Christian thought antipathetic to women’s bodies and minds” (Michelis & Rowland 112). This poem thus constitutes an allegory. The coming of Christ is equated with the rise of an oppressive for the women era. All these show the way this poem can be interpreted within the theoretical framework of feminism.

However, religion’s dominant role in the above interpretation cannot be sidelined. Its centrality in Duffy’s poem is evident, and its influence in Western thought acknowledged. It can be argued that “Queen Herod” constitutes, apart from an excellent example of allegory, an implicit critique of what male thought has turned Christian religion into: a world so oppressive for daughters that women actually need to be protected from Christianity. Through this, Duffy unveils issues that have been disregarded for centuries: the way religion has marginalized women for so long, using also the institution of marriage to succeed it. As Duffy argues, marriage has turned to be “a ring, a nothing, nowt to gold” given by “some wincing Prince” who takes the woman’s “name away” (67), that is, a Prince who arguably changes who she is. It can be argued that Duffy draws focus towards the problem of the female oppression, and makes it possible for the readers to realize it, and in this way indirectly urges for a redefinition of religion. Duffy longs for a religion where “our sleeping girls” (95), that is the women, will be safe from “the hooves of terrible horses” that “thunder and drum” (98-99), that is men.
Duffy’s attempt to draw “on images of the Apocalypse for its effect” (Michelis & Rowland 112) intensifies the dramatic effect. The “hooves of terrible horses thunder and drum” allude to the four horsemen of the Apocalypse (Revelations 6, 1-8), linking the danger of “our sleeping daughters” (95) to the arrival of the four horsemen and the beginning of the end of the world. Since the advent of the four horsemen is considered devil’s work, and will result in destruction, Duffy relates the oppression that “our sleeping daughters” (95) are facing to a sin that will draw the advent of the horsemen. This equates oppressive male behavior with sin, and the advent of the end of the world. Moreover, the version of Queen Herod’s female experience is justified. She is led to this terrible act by the love for her daughter, and through feelings of altruism, the strong feelings that all parents feel for their children. She is also led by her obligation to protect the weak, from the oppression of the strong, and to save her daughter’s life. Queen Herod can in this way be viewed as a strong mother who will act, and will do everything to protect her child, contrary to the major symbol of motherhood in Christianity, Mary, with Duffy complying perfectly with Saiving’s exhortation of the way a mother should behave. In contrast to Mary, she is not willing to sacrifice her child for others. Queen Herod thus displays more earthly feelings, and does not wait patiently for things to happen, but takes control over her own and her beloved ones’ life.

Some maternal feelings are arguably displayed in “Delilah”, too. After she and Samson have sex, a very tender scene takes place.

Then he lay with his head on my lap
for a darkening hour;
his voice, for a change, a soft burr
I could just about hear.
And, yes, I was sure
that he wanted to change,
my warrior.

I was there. (25-32)

When Samson lays his head on Delilah’s lap, Delilah calls Samson “my warrior” (31) revealing her own tender, almost maternal, feelings towards him. The “I was there” (32) shows her duty and willingness to respond to his plea, but also inserts her into the historical and Biblical moment. And once she decides to help her lover, nothing can stop her: “Then with deliberate, passionate hands / I cut every lock of his hair,” (41-42) Duffy writes, and Delilah changes in a woman whose love encompasses both sexual and maternal feelings, and whose strength Samson acknowledges, since she is the one he turns to ask for help and whom he envies. “I cannot be gentle, or loving, or tender” (19) he complains.

To summarize, in all poems an aspect of motherhood is depicted. In “Pope Joan” motherhood is compared to the most important male experience, and is shown as superior. It is suggested as the link between humans and God. In “Queen Herod” the love of a mother meets no constraints. Moreover, males are argued to oppress females, and only a redefinition of religion that will encompass female experience qualifies as the solution. Lastly, in “Delilah”, the greatness of female love seems beyond comparison. Even in a sexual relation, the female displays maternal feelings for her beloved one.
Conclusion

In *The World’s Wife* Duffy proposes a version of history as it could have been known if the narration had also considered the female perspective. All of her poems present real or fictional wives addressing their silenced version of history. As Horner argues, Duffy “engages with the central tenets of western philosophy and culture, wittingly exposing their subversive nature and the often ‘ludicrous views’ in which they result” (Michelis & Rowland 99). Duffy, as mentioned, has stated when interviewed, that her aim was “to bring in extra layers of truth” (Wood), and to unveil a sidelined view of history. Inevitably, this collection has been characterized as a feminist manifesto, and has been interpreted within the theoretical frame work of feminism by a plethora of critics.

Duffy’s intention to revise history is supported by her decision not to alter the basis of the story. In all six poems discussed in this essay, the core of the story remains the same. What changes is the point of view from which they are told, bearing the female experience in mind. A female experience that is invariably influenced by the female body, questioning the conventionally held views about female sexuality and motherhood, which depict the male point of view.

Out of the thirty poems in Duffy’s collection *The World’s Wife*, the themes of the six of them are drawn directly from the Bible. Duffy’s Catholic background suggests the way religion influences her life, and inevitably her work. Duffy is shown to be preoccupied with religious matters, and concerned with religion’s hidden ideology. Through her work, she unveils the subjectivity that in every theological text may brew, by the means of, arguably humorous, revision. A major distortion of ‘truth’ and
objectivity in every historical—as religious—text occurs, when the point of view of only one side is being heard, while the other side’s experience remains completely silenced or under represented. Duffy attempts to alter the balance of powers in religion by inserting the sidelined female version too. The readers are urged to doubt the conventional version of the stories and have the opportunity to have an insight of an alternative version that according to Duffy, could have easily occurred.

In Duffy’s portrayal of Biblical history, the female experience and identity is being reconciled with religion. The stereotype of the females being treacherous and devil’s instrument is challenged, and female sexuality is displayed as a God-given gift, serving His will. Pilate’s wife guided by her sexuality, tries to save Christ, Delilah tries to serve her lover, and Salome tries to offer John the Baptist to God. Sexuality is thus not to be suppressed, but a part of Duffy’s theological vision.

Likewise, motherhood is suggested to serve as a link between women and church, bringing females closer to God. The love of the mother though, is suggested to be strong, and a mother must be willing to protect her children from oppression, and not allowing them to be sacrificed. More human, earthly feelings are thus displayed. Accordingly, female love is argued to encompass many forms of love, with motherly, sexual, and spiritual feelings occasionally intermixing.

Like Saiving, Duffy promotes an attention to the female experience in theology, after exposing the way the male standpoint has distorted theological ‘truths’. She specifically draws attention to females’ “specific sexuality” (Saiving 36) and the importance of maternity in identifying a woman’s love. Moreover, she warns women
against raising their daughters based on a false role model and encourages them in helping them assert themselves as individuals.

Through her poems, Duffy attempts to alter the distorting image of women as they are implicitly presented in the Bible. She insinuates that the Bible, as any historical text, must be looked upon with a critical eye, and exposes in “Queen Herod” that the conventional image of women has facilitated their oppression. But instead of rejecting Christianity, she declares her faith, by moving within the limits of religion, not changing the core of it, like other contemporary feminist theologians. She only proposes a more fair revision that embraces the human experience of both sexes.
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