

**“Feminine Gospels”:
The Poetics of Negotiating and Subverting Gendered Female
Positions in Carol Ann Duffy’s Work**

“Athleta Femina”

“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.”

Carol Ann Duffy
 (“Mrs Beast” 199)

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Women's Hindsight: The Nostalgic Recognition of the Gendered Self	5
Beyond the Feminine: The Poetics of Subverting the Binary Gender Divide.....	12
Mother, Wife and Woman: The Personal Dilemma of Multiple Gender Roles	21
Conclusion.....	29
Works Cited.....	30
Appendix	32

Introduction

Dorothy MacMillan in *A History of Scottish Women's Writing* remarks that "Scottish women's poetry is probably having a better time now than it has ever had" (549). The intellectual wasteland to which as many believed Scottish women's writing was reduced in the 1970s has been revitalised and witnessed the beginnings of a third and infinitely more radical phase in the 1980s and 1990s. As a consequence, the Scottish literary scene of the late twentieth-century has seen the addition of many new Scottish women of letters: poets such as Valerie Gillies, Elizabeth Burns, Liz Lochhead and Kathleen Jamie; novelists like Muriel Spark, Jessie Kesson, Shena Mackay, Candia McWilliam, Emma Tennant, Margaret Elphinstone, and Elspeth Barker; short story writers like Elspeth Davy, Laura Hird, and Janice Galloway; and dramatists such as Joan Ure. The considerable enlargement of the Scottish female creative potential now necessitates the redrawing of Scotland's literary map, allowing for these women the assumption of a place in a previously mainly male cultural domain. As Alison Lumsden and Aileen Christianson reflect in *Contemporary Scottish Women Writers*, "women writers have become fully part of the 'the bedrock' of this 'small and multitudinous country'" (1). The late twentieth-century Scottish Literary Revival, also known as the second-wave Scottish Literary Renaissance, has significantly strengthened the position of women of letters. Beside national concerns, the problematic issues of gender inevitably have been placed on their agenda. Since, "in any work which takes as its parameters the terms 'Scottish' and 'women' there is a sense in which both denote a degree of 'marginality,' an exclusion from the dominant discourse of white male 'Britishness,'" Lumsden and Christianson continue to observe (2). In view of this premise one can see a close relationship between nationality and gender in Scottish women's writing, since the peripheralisation of a nation like the case of Scotland can be equated with that of gender.

The main objective of the contemporary Scottish female literary mind is to give voice to the hitherto voiceless and undermine the patriarchal aspects of gender politics to suggest alternative imaginings and constructions of the marginalised Scottish woman. These "New Generation Female Poets," as Anthony Thwaite in his extensive survey of contemporary British poetry, *Poetry Today*, refers to the late twentieth-century Scottish

female writers, by challenging the concepts of gender and phallogocentric social conventions in their oeuvre strategically draw on the feminist revolutions of the post-1960s. The seminal feminist works of Adrienne Rich such as *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* or Judith Butler's *Imitation and Gender Insubordination* and Hélène Cixous *The Laugh of the Medusa* are avidly read and their radicalism offers a challenging example to the New Generation Female Poets' own emergent feminist position. Also, these Scottish women of letters have been associated with the third-wave Women's Movement, which, Deryn Rees-Jones notes, "fosters and, to some extent, legitimises women's experiences, and validates a desire for self-expression" (2). The New Generation Female Poets' objective to respond to these female desires and experiences, and thus sympathise with the isolated and oppressed members of society, radically strengthens during the administration of the first female Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. "Many people of left-wing liberal sympathies found Margaret Thatcher's monetarist government autocratic and unsympathetic to the least fortunate in society," Michael J. Woods observes (121). Radical Scottish Feminism became disappointed with a female prime minister who seemed to tighten the hold of paternalistic morality and the rigidity of conservative gender roles. In the landmark Bloodaxe anthology, *Sixty Women Poets*, the editor Linda France observes that "Feminism did not die under the rule of Britain's first woman Prime Minister. But what should have been a blessing turned out to be a curse" (qtd. in Woods 122). Contemporary Scottish women's writing has evidently benefited from contact with different feminist agendas, which has significantly contributed to what perhaps is most notable about Scottish women of letters today: their diversity.

In my research I will explore in particular the oeuvre of a Scottish woman of letters who has a deservedly high reputation in Scottish Literature, and whose success as the first female Poet Laureate is also the marker of how far Scottish poetry by women has travelled since the 1970s: Carol Ann Duffy. The Glasgow-born (1955-) female poet first makes her mark in the late 1970s with a number of pamphlets such as *Fleshweathercock*, *Beauty and the Beast* and *Fifth Last Song*. However, the real breakthrough of her career was to win first prize in 1983 in the National Poetry Competition with her poem "Whoever She Was." The same year she received a Scottish Arts Council Award and one year later an Eric Gregory Award. Also, "I like to think that I'm a sort of poet/ for our times. My shout. Know what I mean?" (142); Duffy declares in "The Poet for Our Times" with tremendous

force. From the mid-1980s her position as the “Female Poet for Our Times” is reinforced by the publication of her full-length adult collections *Standing Female Nude*, *Selling Manhattan*, *The Other Country*, *Mean Time*, *The World’s Wife* and the most recent volumes *Feminine Gospels* and *Rapture*. Throughout the 1990s Duffy received several other awards, such as the Dylan Thomas Award, the Cholmondeley Award and the Whitbread Award for her major volumes, but her literary success culminates when she is named as the new Poet Laureate in 2009, the first Scottish woman to be appointed in the 341-year history of the post. Unique and subversive in many respects in the realm of the contemporary Scottish women’s writing Duffy’s poetry has also benefitted from the Women’s Movement, which marks a clear (post)feminist perspective in her work. Deryn-Rees Jones defines this privileged perspective in Duffy’s poetry as “a bridge between a feminist and postfeminist *poetics*” that has favoured the conjugation of issues such as “the importance of women’s experience, the difficulties of women’s lives, and the difficulties of [gender identity] that patriarchy presents to both men and women” (3). In her refusal to conform to any stereotypical and phallogocentric notion of femininity Duffy re-examines the female gendered self constructed across conventional paradigms. “Her feminism is inextricably bound up with gender politics,” Michael J. Woods reaffirms (142). An exploration into women’s gender politics has been the hallmark of Duffy’s poetry since the 1980s.

The aim of the present research is to introduce from different perspectives Carol Ann Duffy’s concepts of gender and the revolutionary poetics she applies in order to challenge the stereotypical binary scheme of gender politics. Through the analysis of a few of her major iconic poems I will illustrate both the inventive poetic devices that project onto the world extravagantly miscellaneous female voices and the complexity of gender issues her female characters reveal. Each chapter in my project centres around a specific problem of female identity. To demonstrate the ways in which Duffy deploys purely feminine and matrifocal perspectives in her poetics, I will scrutinise those avant-garde paintings and drawings, included in the appendix section, from which the poet preferably drew inspiration to rearticulate gendered selves without the interference of social, domestic or phallogocentric conventions. Therefore Henry Moore’s famous wartime drawing “Woman Seated in the Underground, 1941” will be one of the main objectives in chapter one, where I will explore attempts in Carol Ann Duffy’s poetry at reconstructing women’s disturbed identity through nostalgic recognition. In doing so, I will also reveal the poetics of

releasing the hold of fixed temporal entities to subvert women's position in the present. The analysis of poems such as "Woman Seated in the Underground, 1941" and "Moments of Grace" will show that for Duffy "time" no longer means a metaphysically fixed complex, but is linked to being between times, and thus transgress the plight of the gendered self in the present, and find women shelter in the redemptive realm of their memories and remembrance.

In the followings, I will explore in poems such as "Dream," "Standing Female Nude" and "Psychopath" attempts at challenging and redefining conventional gender divisions and respective binary oppositions of the male/female and masculine/feminine within the confines of pervasive social paradigms. By doing so, I will highlight complex depictions of women's performance of reversed gender roles, as well as reveal such subversive poetic devices applied by Duffy, most notably in "Psychopath," as the cross-gender or male-voiced dramatic monologue. The poetics of gender subversions this chapter negotiates through different transgressive female images will extend its scope in the last section of my research, where I will explore in "The Virgin Punishing the Infant," constructed after the painting by Max Ernst, and "Whoever She Was" personal views of multiple female roles. Here, I will reveal the continuous dilemmas and emotional crises women experience, as they are trying to re-articulate and bring into symbiosis their imposed gendered selves, but in the course of which they encounter such dramatic events as maternal fatigue, agitation as well as violence or infant abuse. Each section will reveal a specificity of Duffy's gender politics as deployed in her poetry, and expose the invariable facts about the problematic nature of the gendered self in her own time, such as: the crisis and uncertainty of gender representation, the artificiality of the construction of women's gender position, the lack of possibilities provided for the assertion of women's identity, and the female dilemma caused by having multiple gender roles. The three chapters included in this project will explicate the unaltered complexity of contemporary gender politics as well as illustrate the attempts to challenge and subvert their legacy to some extent. The transgressive spirit Duffy's female characters display testifies to the poet's clear commitment to giving voice to the hitherto voiceless within the realm of gender laws "where the man ask[s] the woman to tell how it felt" ("Caul" 107).

Women's Hindsight: The Nostalgic Recognition of the Gendered Self

“The past is the future waiting for dreams and will find itself there.”
(“Caul” 107)

Before the new millennium, for most people before the dawn of a new era, many of the most problematic social and academic issues such as institutionalised racism, extreme demographic indexes, gay and lesbian rights, minority and ethnic problems started to be consistently re-examined. The same thing has been happening to women's identity and gender politics which both saturate the pre-millennial socio-political landscape and hold sway over the collective literary mind. Carol Ann Duffy, along with other Scottish female poets such as Elizabeth Burns or Kathleen Jamie, displays a firm resolution to illustrate, as Margery Palmer McCulloch also notes in *Scottish Women's Poetry 1972-1999: Transforming Traditions*, that “in the more mobile and culturally diverse society of the late twentieth century a satisfying sense of self and place is not easily achieved” (21). Duffy's poetry consistently tries to recapitulate current affairs through the late eighties and the millennial turn, and thus recollects facts about the insufficiency and uncertainty of women's identity then. Her oeuvre, in view of the overall decadence in the late twentieth century, reflects sheer scepticism about the future in general, and the chances for women's gendered self in particular. In her poem “All Days Lost Days” Duffy affirms her fears by claiming that “memory [of all women] stands in the wild grass/ watching the future arrive/ in a line of big black cars” (55). For her the future is unequivocally ambiguous and the present irrecoverably chaotic, and only the past seems to “offer temporary respite from the harsh realities that must be faced in the present” (Woods 42). Duffy does not intend to resign to the obscure present and the dissolved positionality it offers women, but struggles to find resolutions in negotiating the past and its relevance to the pre-millennial context. The aim of the present chapter is to explore attempts in Duffy's poetry at reconstructing women's disturbed gender identity and, by doing so, to demonstrate that the poet releases the hold of fixed temporal entities in order to subvert women's position in the present. Poems such as “Woman Seated in the Underground, 1941” and “Moments of Grace” will illustrate that for Duffy “time” no longer means a metaphysically fixed complex, but is linked to being between times, and thus transgress the plight of the gendered self in the

present, and find women shelter in the redemptive realm of their memories and remembrance.

Duffy reevaluates the past and its relevance to contemporary female self-recognition by placing her images of women preferably into historically dramatic and terrifying periods, like the Great Wars, the Nazi regime or Vietnam, when through the eyes and mind of the war-shocked, worn-down female figure the woman of her own time records her fears and uncertainties. Poems like “Shooting Stars” and “Woman Seated in the Underground, 1941” reflect this type of parallel and, as Deryn Rees-Jones remarks, “testify to the poet’s continuing need to remember the past, while in the most exciting and subversive ways to rethink and rearticulate the [present]” (4). In particular, “Woman Seated in the Underground, 1941” makes a primary example of Duffy’s attempts at recovering the lost and dissolved female identity in the discursive webs of the past. In this wartime poem she constructs the dramatic monologue of an amnesic female character, desperately struggling to recollect her lost memories during the Blitz, based on Henry Moore’s sketch (Appendix, Picture 1) by the same title. In a podcast interview, as the new Poet Laureate gave to BBC in 2009, Duffy explains how she was invited by the Tate Gallery to select an artwork to write a poem about, and chose a Henry Moore sketch of a faceless, skeleton-shaped woman in a shelter together with a crowd of unfamiliar people during a bombing raid. As Duffy recalls in detail the particular experience she had while looking at Moore’s drawing, she also admits how enchanted she was by the intensity and humanity it held, helping her to imagine what it would have been like to endure the traumas of war and violence, and how memory would have been the only way of regaining one’s gender identity in the destruction. Duffy, by elaborating Moore’s image on the lone and psychotic woman it depicts, argues that in a world-wide crisis the only solution left for women to recover their damaged self is to subvert the omnipotence of the present they live in, and to quest for the uplifting time in the past that could bring satisfaction.

The very first lines of the poem, “I forget. I have looked at the other faces and found/ no memory, no love” (21), introduce the woman’s hopeless psychosis and the idea that the bombing had so much traumatised her that all of her memories have been lost. Although the speaker in the poem is suffering from amnesia brought about by the shock and chaos of the air raid, she is trying to comprehend the milieu around her and expects to receive something from the crowd of people which could validate her fractured gender identity. Despite the prevailing adverse conditions she is trying to recall her life and

remember the self she might have had before the destructive war. As Christopher Whyte observes, “the speakers in Duffy’s poems resonate with what they encounter at a level almost below speech, at times suffering notable levels of pain, but never lapsing into self-pity” (224). The shell-shocked female image claims: “No. Someone has loved me. Someone/ is looking for me even now. I live somewhere” (21). Despite her deep mental and emotional crisis the amnesic woman of Duffy’s poem is continuously trying to recall fragments from her past, and thus moderate her traumatised reality in the present. For Jane Thomas, “the idea of ‘love’ for example is used to suggest secure self-definition. The woman cites it in order to ward off the problematic ‘looseness’ that threatens to dislocate her” (128). Also, the way the female image desperately gives emphasis to her words like the exclamation “No.” or the assertion “even now” negate the idea she is completely alone and without a self. These reflect her faith in the fulfilled female self she had in those remote peaceful years. Since the present does not provide her any identity, and the hope for a better future is shattered by “sirens, planes, fire and bombs” (21), her only chance of escape is to turn back to the past. She believes that through nostalgia and remembrance her damaged self recovers.

Through the woman’s enduring but painful remembrance Duffy demonstrates that the task to recall memories is not simple at all. By claiming “I sing the word *darling* and it yields nothing. Nothing” (21) the female speaker manifests that her attempt at nostalgic recognition, in spite of her resolution, sometimes stagnates. The amnesic woman’s damaged self in “Woman Seated in the Underground, 1941,” like the fragmented female identity characteristic of Duffy’s own time, is exposed to multiple difficulties that might hinder remembering. Since her very first attempts to evoke her memories fail due to her shell-shock, she tries to validate herself by other means. As the subsequent lines suggest “Their [the crowd’s] laughter fills the tunnel, but it does not/ comfort me. There was a bang and then/ I was running with the rest through smoke” (21); one of the options left for her self-recognition seems to be identifying the crowd of nameless people around her, as well as being identified or validated by them. However, the woman soon has to undermine this alternative as she recognises that “now they [the crowd] are singing. *Underneath the lantern/ by the barrack gate*. But waiting for whom?/ Did I? I have no wedding ring, no handbag, nothing” (21, emphasis in original). Her words imply that the tumultuous mass fails to define her. As Thomas observes, “as people they are unable to tell her who she is, and as possible modes of being they offer her no positive ways out of her psychosis” (127).

Since the war-shocked woman is denied any form of recognition from others, she tries to search for a further potential that helps to recall her identity. “I know I am pregnant, but I do not know my name [...] A child is crying. Mine doesn’t show yet. Baby” (21): as these lines demonstrate her own body is still able to reveal certain experiences to her. She asserts her pregnancy that situates her in the discourse of gender and heterosexuality. “However she does not know her ‘name’. She knows she is a [pregnant] woman but with nothing to ‘fix’ her further, ‘no wedding ring, no handbag, nothing’, she is open to the charge of ‘looseness’” (Thomas 128). In other words, aside from pregnancy nothing else is able to channel to the amnesic woman an identity and her helpless psychosis and traumatised reality deprive her of the stabilising effects of a sense of a coherent self from which to articulate her subjectivity. Neither the milieu around her, nor her own body validate the woman’s identity. Duffy’s introduction of ways that fail to recover the amnesic woman’s gendered self reflects the deficiencies of her present, the lack of possibilities provided for the assertion of women’s identity.

Having elaborated extensively on the failed alternatives in the recovery of the female self, Duffy reaffirms the precedence of memories “as providing the primary source of mental balm for the persona in ‘Woman Seated in the Underground, 1941’” (Woods 117). In spite the fact that the woman’s memory is seriously damaged, the lines of the last stanza, “My hands mime the memory of knitting/ Purl. Plain. I know how to do these things” (21), suggest that what is able to uplift her is the remembrance of her old self. The woman returns to the mode of nostalgia and despite the mental pain she has to endure during the process of remembrance, she is trying to retrieve herself by means of her old memories, such as her hands miming that she had knitted once. She realises that the only source for her self-survival and self-recovery in such an atrocious time as the Second World War is to remember the past and its redeeming memories, even if it means to subdue her amnesia and endure the trials of her personal recollection. Like the female image in Henry Moore’s wartime drawing the one in Duffy’s poem will be a timeless symbol of fear, vulnerability and endurance, since she does not lapse into self-pity but responds to her adverse conditions in the present, even if it is a slow and very painful process of remembrance. Her attempts are on many fronts emblematic, and through her dramatic monologue Duffy provides an insight into the ways the woman processes her wartime horrors. The poem makes the reader possible to compare the uncertainties of the female self in the atrocious year 1941 and the poet’s chaotic present. The war-shocked,

amnesic woman's attempts to recover her gender identity through nostalgia sounds legal at the millennial turn, when the future is seen as uncertain, the present harsh and only the past with all of its memories redeeming.

Duffy's "Moments of Grace," like many of the poems in her fourth major collection *Mean Time*, follows the example of earlier works, such as "Woman Seated in the Underground, 1941," in reflecting the redemptive effects of the past and memory on the dissolved gender identity, and thus breaking the temporal continuity and linear perceptivity in the female images' life. "Moments of Grace" introduces, as Angelica Michelis and Antony Rowland remark in *The Poetry of Carol Ann Duffy: "Choosing though words,"* that "beyond the complex relationship between past and signification, in particular when focusing on memory, how time in its particularisation of past, present, future impacts on female identity" (22). Trying to recover the dissolved female self in her poem through nostalgic recognition Duffy brings under closer scrutiny what happens to the retrospective woman while she is also in the present, thus wedged between times. After she completed *Mean Time*, and revealed how in the course of subversive gender depiction in it she got acquainted with new alternatives of temporal realities, Duffy has manifested that "time can refer to the fact that [it] is not a metaphysically fixed entity but linked to its temporal positions of past, present and future which allow us to think of being 'between times'" (qtd. in Michelis-Rowland 21). Since for Duffy "time" represents a flexible and versatile complex, her images as thinking as well as being between times to subvert and re-articulate gender positions, is a relevant paradigm applied by the female persona of "Moments of Grace" as well.

The lines immediately in the very first stanza, "The small boat of the day sails into the morning/ [...] the full trees/ which sound like the sea, leaving my hands free/ to remember. Moments of grace. *Like this*" (111), record the female speaker's, as Woods phrases, "kaleidoscopic mixture of impressions" (117). She recalls fragments of her idyllic, almost dream-like memory, and the way she remembers them is highly symbolic. "The small boat of the day [as] sail[ing] into the morning" (111) evokes the idea of both evanescence and faith in the future, since there is a definite morning where the day heads for. This idyllic type of nostalgia displays the woman's optimism that once in the past she had been full of hope and believed in the future. Her other impression, "the full trees which sound like the sea" (111), through its auditory imagery evokes a pleasant memory, a fragment of an old sound that is associated with peace and calm. As Deryn Rees-Jones

observes, “the poem is an assemblage of broken sounds, fragments in Eliot’s words, to shore against ruin. The speaker’s, and perhaps the poet’s, nostalgia for the past is also a nostalgia for song and non-representational sound” (45). For the female speaker what means the moments of grace is to freely remember the past and its redeeming sounds and memories which help her to overcome the ruins of the present. “The perceptible disappointment of the persona who feels lost in the present tries to re-create his sense of self by placing it in a specific point in the past” (Michelis-Rowland 22). By recalling in the second stanza the time when she was “shaken by first love and kissing a wall” (111) the woman finds shelter in an old memory of joy that uplifts and reaffirms her female identity, and places her in the discourse of gender and heterosexuality. “It seems we live in those staggering years” (111): she feels that her present destroys all her illusions and what she had believed in earlier. Therefore, she chooses to preserve her idyllic memories, like her first love, in order to recall them whenever she needs strength to survive and challenge her position in the harsh present.

Duffy’s “Moments of Grace” also demonstrates, like “Woman Seated in the Underground, 1941,” that remembering the past and its redeeming memories is sometimes very hard and the woman encounters multiple difficulties that block her. As the subsequent lines imply, “The dried ink on the palms then ran suddenly wet/ a glistening blue name in each fist/ A face to the name. *Gone*. [...] Memory’s caged bird that won’t fly” (111), even precious memories, like the ink that once on the surface dries, fade with the passing time, and their once uplifting effect on the self faints like a caged bird captured to not fly. While in “Woman Seated in the Underground, 1941” the woman has to struggle with her psychosis to remember, in “Moments of Grace” the female speaker fights against the malevolent effects of the time to preserve her memories. Time is malevolent in Duffy’s poetry in the sense that “as an inevitable process is intent on robbing us of our memory” (21), Michelis and Rowland claim. Duffy herself explains, in the preface of her fourth major volume, how she understands that time is mean and malevolent: “The poems in *Mean Time* are about the different ways in which time brings about change or loss. [...] The effects of time can be mean. Mean can mean average. The events in the poems [the distance of history or the renewal of memories] can happen to the average man or woman” (qtd. in Rees-Jones 44). Accordingly, the poet claims that in order to find shelter in the past and through that recover the damaged female self, one has to overcome the “vanishing scents and colours of hours” (111), which is the irreversible process of losing redeeming

memories with the passing of time. Saying “Now I take off my watch, let a minute unravel/ in my hands, listen and look as I do so” (111) the female image in “Moments of Grace” challenges the imperialism of time and the linear continuity it dictates and tries to remember a moment of old grace that is precious for her and uplifts her identity in the harsh present. “These days we are adjectives, nouns. In moments of grace/ we were verbs” (111): the metonymic images of these lines reveal the woman’s belief that in the past she was an active and determined woman, unlike in the present when she is the shadow of her old self. The past is the remedy for all the pain her identity suffers from in the present. Lines in another poem “Caul” from *Mean Time* echo and reflect just the same idea the woman claims in “Moments of Grace”: “The past is the future waiting for dreams/ and will find itself there” (107). Through the juxtaposed remote time-continuums of the past and future, and the ambivalence they naturally entail, these two lines epitomise Duffy’s understanding of the eternal presence of the past in her own, as well as all other female peers’ “mean” time.

Duffy’s attempts to recover a dissolved female gender identity through nostalgic recognition are manifested in poems like “Woman Seated in the Underground, 1941” and “Moments of Grace.” Both works reflect in specific ways the redemptive power of the past in the process of uplifting the damaged female self, while also highlight the complexities of remembrance. The female characters in both struggle in their own ways with the difficulties of recalling old memories like hope, and broken sounds and fragments of joys, which could help to stabilise and validate their gender identity in the present. Accordingly, their attempts representing deliberately subversions testify to the poet’s clear commitment to re-articulate the fears of uncertainty in her own time, as well as to re-affirm the relevance of the past to the present and the future, on the brink of such a momentous period as the millennial turn. The female figures attempt to return to the optimistic, uncomplicated realm of the past reflect the chaos of their present and the uncertainty of their future. Therefore transgressing the limits of fixed temporal realities enables them to subvert their gender position in the form of remembrance. What the women in Duffy’s poems dare to believe in, even though they have to overcome the pain of mental crisis or the malevolent effects of time, is the past which means for them escape and shelter.

Beyond the Feminine: The Poetics of Subverting the Binary Gender Divide

“The man and woman are different colours and I am both of them.”
(“Dies Natalis” 32)

Postmodern feminist theorists have tended to redefine gender politics and the binary gender divisions of the male/female and masculine/feminine within the confines of pervasive social paradigms. Judith Butler observes in her essay *Imitation and Gender Insubordination* that “there is no original or primary gender [...] but gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original” (722). Her subversive notion of gender norms implies that the borders between gender binaries have collapsed, and the masculine no longer belongs necessarily to the male and the feminine to the female. Accordingly, the potential for gender reversal has been extended by the fall of “proper” gender, since “where the notion of the ‘proper’ operates, it is always and only improperly installed as the effect of a compulsory system” (Butler 722). Butler’s views have widely influenced her contemporaries. Female poets like Carol Ann Duffy have rearticulated the female gendered selves as constructed across stereotypical classifications and sharp limitations, which arbitrarily associate the feminine with the passive, weak and emotional against the dominant and strong masculine. Through the breakdown of dogmatic gender conventions in her poems, Duffy incorporates devices of subversion of gender into her aesthetics. In doing so, she does not only expose what has been shrouded in shadows for a long time, which is the crisis of female gender representation, but also “celebrates women’s capacity to achieve a kind of agency [...] over their gender identity” (Broom 92). This chapter will explore in poems such as “Dream,” “Standing Female Nude” and “Psychopath” the poet’s attempts at challenging conventional gender divides, and, by providing complex depictions of women’s performance of reversed gender roles, reveal such subversive poetic devices applied by Duffy as the cross-gender or male-voiced dramatic monologue.

“Dream” is one of Duffy’s earliest poems, in *Fifth Last Song* (1982), which through the account of a woman’s determination to liberate her true gender identity subverts conventional gender norms at their core. This forcefulness and assertiveness Duffy’s

transgressive female represents is linked to the fact that the poet creates her image after the British surrealist painter Roland Penrose's "Valentine;" the portrait of the mighty mimic muse with fair azure skin, long waving hair with birds nesting in it, a slender neck interwoven by the deep thorns of rose and eyes and mouth settled by feeding butterflies (Appendix, Picture 2). As the opening lines immediately imply, "She has placed bright insects on her eyes/ to beguile him" (15), the woman in Duffy's poem like Penrose's Valentine constructs herself through of farce and camouflage. Her self-determination and asserted recognition at the same time are no longer overshadowed by the practice of social laws and the set of authoritarian gender paradigms, which would induce the charade of her self-delusive mimesis. As Sarah Broom notes, "while at times Duffy does emphasize a sense of being trapped within the dominant discourses of gender [...she also] cleverly and subtly protests against the 'imperialism' of those who want to dictate how women should feel about their female embodiment" (92-96). Duffy's Valentine is an eternal symbol of both vulnerability and endurance, which testifies to the assertiveness and courage of women who are forced beyond the ramparts of social limitations and severe stereotypes.

The female image in "Dream," by beguiling the "masculine" other with her transgression of conventional gender norms, frees herself to become like the bright insects on her eyes that open their wings and leave the world behind. She strives to get free from the weak and vulnerable feminine stereotypes and place herself in the desired position of the strong and intimidating masculine. She subverts her former subservient gender identity that was constructed by absorbing mimetic mechanisms and subdues it to the strategic reversal of the feminine and masculine. As the subsequent lines "His city is grey waiting/ for her arrival. When she comes/ butterflies drift out of her, on her thighs/ bruises form like dragonflies" (15) imply, the collective "masculine" dwindles to a humble and weak state beside the redemptive and powerful "feminine" whose conscious quest at appropriate gender formation becomes an emancipatory act against suppressive gender laws. The respective images of butterflies and dragonflies, similar but still two different kinds, concord with the conventional dichotomy of gendered selves; the more humble drifting butterflies connote the timid, weak feminine and the dragonflies the dominant and brave masculine. As Deryn Rees-Jones observes, "'Dream' works by articulating a set of antithetical objects and placing them in juxtaposition: butterflies are balanced by the more aggressive dragonflies [and] female assertiveness by a masculine vulnerability" (7). Duffy

strategically inverts the traditional feminine-masculine dialectic in order to undermine binary gender oppositions and enhance the woman's subversive re-embodiment.

The woman's transgressive spirit and self-assertiveness that the strategic subversion of gender binaries amplify extends its scope further in the subsequent part of the poem: "From the sky matches fall. She is/ picking them up she is striking them/ she is burning all his bridges" (15). The implication of violence through the intentionally caused fire reflects the woman's steadfast determination to challenge and marginalise the monumentality of binary gender oppositions. Her awareness of the potential for subversive gender formation allows her to affirm the validity of her mission and expose the lies of dogmatic gender binaries. By "burning all his bridges" (15), the woman consciously removes the desired domination of the gendered self from the collective masculine. In the process of gender subversion the "masculine" other becomes the subject of emasculation and feminisation, and consequently the woman that of defeminisation and masculinisation. Duffy's concluding line "She has placed bright insects on her eyes/ and she is flying" (15) assumes that gender subversion eventually has taken place and the woman by subverting her former gender identity also subverts the ramparts and constraints of pervasive social norms that forced her to adopt commonly perceived characteristics. She finally reaps her due reward for challenging the conventional gender divide. "She is flying" (15): she has liberated her gendered self that is no longer exclusively feminine.

The *fin de siècle* prostitute in Duffy's "Standing Female Nude" also displays steadfast assertiveness and determination for challenging the binary oppositions of gender by means of a consciously used feminine force. As Woods remarks, "the woman who stands up is confident and assertive, while her nudity indicates that she feels no need to cover herself in any way" (9). She drops the shawl that covers her bare unadorned reality, and reveals her meagre waist, hanging breasts and sickly constitution, as no one any longer "will [laugh]/ at such an image of a river whore" (19). By exposing her bareness to the male artist Georges, and through his art eventually to the French audience, the nude prostitute does not only expose the deficiencies of women's conventional gendered embodiment, but also manifests her intention to embody the dominant and strong masculine type of gendered self, which the stereotypical social discourses arbitrarily remove from her identity. As Rees Jones observes, "womanliness in 'Standing Female Nude' could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it" (24). Like the woman in

“Dream” the nude sitter is forced behind the borders of imposed mimesis and is liberated from the embodiment of a stereotypical gendered self. As she stands up and reveals herself in a vertical, quasi phallic position, the nude prostitute exposes the imposed acts of self-deception, and declares who she really is.

Before enacting her determined attempts to subvert her imposed gender identity, the nude sitter consciously delays her predicted victory of reversing gender roles and records from inside the multiple anomalies that hinder her. “He drains the colour from me. Further to the right,/ Madame. And do try to be still [...] I shall be presented analytically and hung/ in great museums. The bourgeoisie will coo/ at such an image of a river whore” (19): these words of inner monologue through the nude woman react to Georges and the French wealthy clique’s authority implies her passive and vulnerable position, the conventional feminine stance in the scheme of binary gender oppositions. That Georges “drains the colour from [her]” (19), as he constructs his own image of the prostitute, suggests, his masterly (re)creation entails acts of exploitation, as the verb ‘drain’ indicates that her true and real quintessence, her ‘colour’ gradually fades. Obligated to bear with passivity what is done to her enforces the nude prostitute into a helpless situation of total silence, where she is monopolised from all sides by the voyeuristic man and his desires. What she considers at first to be the only possible way for being active is an accurate introspection about the suppressive context she has to counteract. Therefore, Duffy’s “Standing Female Nude” offers, as Margery Palmer McCulloch observes, “forms of expression which record women’s experience from the inside, often ‘speaking’ what previously has been unspeakable from a female point of view” (19). The nude woman’s contemplation of Georges’ exploitative art, and her scepticism about what “they [the bourgeoisie] call Art” (19), reflect the nude sitter’s conscious psychic and cognitive performance, her primary sources of gender subversion, but they also prearrange her later physical and linguistic activity.

Although without manifesting her thoughts and emotions by means of linguistic acts initially, Duffy’s nude sitter ultimately prevails over the exploiting and stereotypical atmosphere that surrounds her. She constructs Georges in terms of his actions and artistic capabilities and challenges the man’s gendered image, and simultaneously her owns as well, according to what he does, says and how he behaves. “He is concerned with volume, space [...] There are times he does not concentrate/ and stiffens for my warmth [...] My smile confuses him” (19): these lines imply that the nude sitter as contemplates the

possessive, sexually effusive male artist calls into question his ability to produce an accurate gender representation of her. While in the creative process the nude woman remains emotionally indifferent and sober, Georges displays an excessive sexual behaviour, and thus she becomes aside from a sitter an outlet for the artist's sexual thirst. Accordingly, the words "volume" and "space" in this context might imply that Georges, as he depicts the woman's bareness afore him, fantasies about her breasts and vagina, and wants to possess them. "The artist's [Georges'] fantasies of sexual contact with the model are transported on to canvas: instead of inserting his penis into her he 'dips his brush repeatedly into the paint'" (Michelis-Rowland 15). As he dirties the woman's body countless times in his mind, while her "space" and "volume" are put in detail onto his canvas, Georges transforms his carnal desires into actual intimacy, irrespective of the indifference the woman feels towards him. He is basically like the ancient male artist Pygmalion who became infatuated by his sculpture muse and let his fingers sink into her flesh and squeezed the elastic material after his own taste, and exploited the woman's passive naked anatomy by his voyeuristic gaze. As Jeffry Wainwright observes, "artists like [Georges], worshipper in the long tradition of artistic idealisation of the feminine, cannot cope with reality" (51). Georges' defect of representing the "real" nude accurately is inherent in the fact that Duffy constructed him in the image of the French Cubist painter Georges Braque, who openly admitted the lack of referentiality in most of his paintings of women. Braque once reflected on his portrait *Nude* (Appendix, Picture 3), which inspired Duffy of writing "Standing Female Nude," confirmed his struggles as follows:

I couldn't portray a woman in all her natural loveliness. I haven't the skill. No one has. I must, therefore, create a new sort of beauty, the beauty that appears to me in terms of volume, of line, of mass, of weight, and through that beauty interpret my subjective impression. Nature is mere a pretext for decorative composition, plus sentiment. It suggests emotion, and I translate that emotion into art. I want to express the absolute. (qtd. in Michelis-Rowland 14)

Braque testifies to the overall aesthetic exploitation and artistic autonomy present at Duffy's poem as well, since the creative voyeur depicts an idiosyncratic but rather simplified version of the nude prostitute, and thus fails to reflect the real self. "When it's finished,/ he [Georges] shows me proudly, lights a cigarette. I say/ twelve francs, and get my shawl. It does not look like me" (19), she says. Georges' creation is eventually a mirror

placed before the prostitute to look into but it reflects a falsified and deformed image of her gendered self.

The masculine weakness in Duffy's poem is present both in the form of artistic incapability and in excessive emotional and sexual behaviour that contrast feminine sobriety and emotional reservedness. Georges as a male artist fails to identify who the nude prostitute really is. Hélène Cixous's claim applies which elaborates on women's representation by men: "you [men] only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing" (13). Albeit Georges does look at the deadly woman before him, he cannot see the real her or the beauty of her inner light. He only drains the woman's "colours" as he dips his brush into the paint. But, "Little man/ you've not the money for the arts I sell [...] These artists/ take themselves too seriously" (19): the nude prostitute remains completely immune to the male artist's sexual passion, and although she is doomed to silence, she defeats the sensualism of the masculine by her powerful linguistic and psychic acts that she has subjected to strategic introspection. After delaying the feminine transgression, in the last part of her poem Duffy explicitly subverts the gender roles, and the nude woman denigrates in every possible way the male artist by calling him little man that diminishes both his art and assumed masculinity. As Margery Palmer McCulloch remarks, "'Standing Female Nude' is a recovery of female subjectivity, spoken by the cynical model whose low register punctures the artist's pretensions" (19). And the concluding lines, "I say/ twelve francs, and get my shawl. It does not look like me" (19) manifest that the standing nude finally speaks out with tremendous force and confidence. She regenerates her identity through the creation of a strong self and by means of a determined reversal takes control over her former passivity. She stands up and with assertiveness claims the defect of the artist's portrait. The notion of "standing female nude" in Duffy's aesthetics does no longer necessarily mean to pose still and silent before the creative masculine other. It rather applies to a determined and self-assertive female refusing the shadows of arbitrary colours that have been draining the important masculine part from her imposed gender identity.

Deryn Rees-Jones observes that "knowing who we are, and finding a way to tell ourselves, are two of Duffy's central concerns. In questioning the ways in which we are represented, she also addresses the [possibilities] of knowing the self through otherness" (17). Duffy's attempts to subvert the binary gender divide culminate in the use of the cross-gender or male-voiced dramatic monologue, the subversive discourse of, as Rees-Jones

phrases it, knowing the self through otherness. “Psychopath,” unlike the female lyric voices of “Dream” and “Standing Female Nude,” depicts women’s unidentified gender politics from the male point of view. The male-voiced, respectively cross-gender dramatic monologue, applied in the poem is “a method of disclaiming or dislocating oneself from an [insufficient] subject position” and of bringing it to an over-determined and objectified selfhood (Rees-Jones 17). The removal and relocation of identities from one position to the other suggests a kind of split in the process of gendered embodiment. By depicting a psychotic character Duffy’s implication is that women’s gendered embodiment is like the violent and schizophrenic outsider: split by aggressive forces, in other words by the dominant conventions of binary oppositions. However, the poet strategically takes advantage of this split and uses it for negotiating the artificiality of the construction of women’s position. By dislocating the female self and bringing it close to an over-dominant male selfhood, to the dangerous masculine psychopath, Duffy subverts the conventional dichotomy of genders.

“Psychopath” is, Sarah Broom remarks, “an attempt by Duffy to imagine a masculine subjectivity of the most disturbed and disturbing kind” (90). “I remember the wasps, the sun blazing as I pulled/ her knickers down. I touched her and I went hard [...] Too late. I eased her down the canal/ and talked sexy” (43): this insight into the psychopathic consciousness reveals how women brought to masculine position see and experience the world. By projecting unsaid and unidentified female perspectives through the male voice onto the world, Duffy’s cross-gender dramatic monologue proves that, Broom continues to observe, “a woman’s fantasy [is] a particular kind of male subjectivity” (89). The psychological dualism in the poem opens up new horizons for gender plurality, since through the eyes and mind of a male psychopath women are able to gain new experiences of both extreme masculinity and the intimate events that belong to that dangerous male existence. For instance they can observe the man’s sexual conquests, quasi-uncontrollable predatory force to tempt women and assuage primitive instincts and needs with them. As the following lines “I don’t talk much. I swing up beside them and do it/ with my eyes. I could smell her. I thought, Here we go, old son/ The fairground spun round us and she blushed like candyfloss” (43) imply, the psychopath identifies himself with sexual plenitude since he naturally possesses a paralysing emanation to numb women’s senses. “She rode past me/ on a wooden horse, laughing, and the air sang *Johnny/ Remember Me*. I turned the world faster, flash” (43, emphasis in original): the wooden

horse refers to the fairground ride, but there could be an oblique reference here to the Trojan horse involved in the war that started after the abduction of Helen. In this respect, the girl presents an irresistible challenge for the psychopath to give her “a handrail to Venus” (43) and take “a swing of whisky from the flask and french it/ down her throat” (43). As Woods reflects, “this cockney rhyming slang for ‘penis’ [a handrail to Venus] is ironic in the voice of a man who has no comprehension of the tender implications of ‘woo’ or that Venus was the goddess of love and beauty, not simply sex. His disgusting and invasive act of forcing whisky down the girl’s throat when he kisses her is another prefiguring of his crime of violation” (21). The psychopath is an explicit sensualist who is constantly driven by his sheer masculine force to “woo [local girls] with goldfish and coconuts, whispers in the Tunnel of Love” (43). Therefore, the self-obsessed and disturbed man’s attitude to women is limited to seeing them as sexual objects. He has the stereotypical male view that a woman who says “no” actually means “yes” and becomes violent when refused. “I could be anything with my looks,/ my luck, my brains. I bought a guitar and blew a smoke ring/ at the noon. Elvis is nothing” (45): a man who believes he has more good looks and potential than Elvis Presley cannot accept refusal by a girl.

The psychopath’s identity is, Jane Thomas notes, “deeply indebted to frequently reiterated, one-dimensional images from the cinema and other areas of popular culture: ‘Jimmy Dean’, ‘Johnny, Remember Me’, ‘Brando’, ‘Elvis’, ‘Jack the Lad’, ‘Ladies’ Man’ even Humphrey Bogart’s Rick Blaine ‘Here’s looking at you’” (132). The psychotic man often cites slogans and low colloquial terms which shape both his composite identity and strange behaviour. His references to popular culture tell one a great deal about the way his mind is saturated with images of people who are more successful than he is. The way he acts and expresses his inner self, the casual mode of his linguistic performance, such as “D.A” (43), “quid” (43) and “crackling” (43), “Don’t mess with me, angel, I’m no nutter” (45) or “Drink up son, the world is your fucking oyster” (45) and every component of his image is predominantly and exclusively masculine. His narcissistic behaviour consciously excludes and eliminates any possibility for embodying feminine traits. Thomas also observes that “the psychopath’s obsession with his masculine identity necessitates the domination, violation and obliteration of its perceived feminine opposite” (133). Therefore, the brutality of the rape and murder in stanza seven, as the psychopath punches a girl so hard that she loses a tooth and thereafter is dumped, unconscious, into the canal where she drowns, could reflect an intention in Duffy’s poem to eliminate every trace of the feminine

from the persona. Duffy's "Psychopath," by means of the poetic device of the cross-gender or male-voiced dramatic monologue projects unsaid female experiences publicly and extravagantly onto the world and provides a far more extreme alternative for gender subversion than "Dream" or "Standing Female Nude"; in its gender politics the poem is evidently extreme and subversive.

"Dream," "Standing Female Nude" and "Psychopath" are poems that reflect Duffy's attempts at rearticulating in the most extravagant ways conventional gender roles and binary gender oppositions. The poet applies different subversive modes and poetic techniques in her works to challenge the dogmatic social views of gender, and thus copes with the crisis of accurate gender interpretation. "Dream" and "Standing Female Nude" introduce the self-assertive, transgressive female that through her conscious psychic, cognitive and linguistic acts is trying to break down the borders and ramparts of imposed and self-delusive mimesis, and thus undermine the conventional feminine-masculine dialectic. "Psychopath," at the same time, by dislocating the female self and bringing it to an over-dominant male identity, and through the eyes and mind of a narcissistic and maniac male to gain new experiences of extreme masculinity, applies a more subversive poetic device, the cross-gender or male-voiced dramatic monologue, to challenge the dichotomy of genders. Through their multi-layered subversiveness Duffy's poems put into new light women's gendered embodiment and reveal their constant and conscious striving for incorporating the masculine into their identity. Duffy's women, the self-assertive Valentine, the standing female nude and the woman behind the psychopath, all represent a strong kind of female that plays an important role in challenging and subverting the binary gender divide.

Mother, Wife and Woman: The Personal Dilemma of Multiple Gender Roles

“The ghost of ourselves [...] throng in a mirror, blind,
laughing and weeping. They know who we are.”

(“Close” 115)

The very last decades of the twentieth century display a growing scepticism about the gender laws constructed according to dogmatic social conventions and limitations. The traditional and worn-out scheme of gender politics necessarily raises a plethora of concerns in the contemporary context and induces the collective literary mind to re-articulate gender identity and principally the gender roles fixed social norms impose on the woman. Like most Scottish women of letters, Carol Ann Duffy’s oeuvre is preoccupied with problematic gender issues. She strives to re-examine the primary gender roles—the mother, the wife and the woman as sovereign individual—associated with the female. The poet, by scrutinising traditional gender politics in her poetry, indicates the following concern in “Alphabet for Auden”: “I’ll be Mother, who’ll be me?” (6). Through the female speaker’s anxiety about the different gender roles that the social norms project onto her Duffy negotiates whether the woman is able to concord her different gender roles and be a mother, a wife and a woman at the same time. The iconic line suggests that women trying to bring their gender roles into symbiosis inevitably experience several personal difficulties, since “gender roles are constructed out of various contingent social practices, many of which conflict and compete with one another” (Thomas 123). The aim of the present chapter is to explore in poems such as “The Virgin Punishing the Infant” and “Whoever She Was” certain personal female views of multiple gender roles, and in doing so, to reveal the continuous dilemmas and emotional crises women experience, as they are trying to negotiate and re-articulate their imposed gendered selves.

Duffy’s poem “The Virgin Punishing the Infant” introduces a most serious female gender role and its immense responsibility from a subversive point of view. Through a powerful but inverted biblical theme the poet reveals maternal difficulties and their effects on the female self. Duffy’s objective in her poem is to rearticulate the paradigm of self-sacrificing and self-alienating motherhood. It was inspired by the shocking beauty of an avant-garde portrait which, subverting the ancient concept of maternal care, presents a

particular example of the Marian art. “The Virgin Punishing the Infant” was constructed in the image of the surrealist painter Max Ernst’s portrait by the same title, which, unlike the idealised presentation of the Madonna and child, depicts the immaculate Virgin Mary shedding her tears of rage and angrily spanking the divine infant Jesus whose bruised body and fallen halo prove the evident presence of harsh maternal violence (Appendix, Figure 4). Through the application of the subverted mother-cult in her poem Duffy is able to express what has been shrouded in shadows for a long time, namely the swamping demands of maternity that undermine the concord of female gender roles and dictate what the woman can or cannot do. The poet reveals the Blessed Virgin’s traumatised reality that affects her latent aggression as well as aggravates her seemingly paradigmatic but self-absorbing motherhood, resulting in infant abuse, which elucidates the unidentified and darker sides of mothering.

As the opening lines imply, “He [Little Jesus] spoke early. Not the *goo goo goo* of infancy/ but *I am God*” (53, emphasis in the original), the woman in Duffy’s poem must face the strange otherness of her spiritual child, who is dramatically deviating from what is expected in ordinary infancy. His abnormalities inherent in advanced physical improvement and super-intelligence, as reaffirmed by his strong assertion “*I am God*” (53), are predominantly opposed by the onomatopoetic sequences of the worldly infants’ ‘*goo goo goo*’. “The child was solitary/ his wide and solemn eyes could fill your head [...] After he walked, our normal children crawled” (53), therefore the infant is different in a special and inexplicable way, so the normal amount of maternal care and responsibility for him, the future Prophet exponentially grow. Duffy strategically takes advantage of this extreme motherhood and reveals what happens to the woman and her emotional and psychological state when she is doubly challenged in her gender roles. The poet’s attempt to provide an accurate insight into the woman’s subjective dilemma of her severe maternal role is for the first time demonstrated in the lines of the second stanza: “She [the Virgin Mary] grew anxious in that second year, would stare/ as stars saying, *Gabriel? Gabriel?*” (53), which project onto the world the mother’s emotional instability and her weariness of the swamping demands of child care. The growing anxiety that the above extract implies indicates the sheer physical and emotional absorption of her mothering aggravated by the refrain of the question “*Gabriel?*” As the Virgin desperately evokes the archangel, she reconsiders the ultimatum she was given at the Annunciation. From that moment onwards, as the archangel Gabriel announces the Mary of Nazareth the Holy Mother, her sovereign

female self narrows down to a servile and sacrificial mother, which excludes any personal desires and needs of her once sovereign self, thus transforming her into a self-alienated maternal subject. As Alison Smith remarks, in *And Woman Created Woman*, as follows: “women will under pressure of self-limiting role undergo the pain of physical and mental breakdown of the constituents of the self” (33). Due to her child’s otherness and the extra concerns he needs the Virgin is completely consumed by the multiple difficulties of extreme maternal care and thus her gender position seems to be determined as one of exclusive motherhood. Since she is absorbed into the mechanism of suffocating motherhood, her predominantly maternal position subverts the harmony of her gender identity and leaves no room for practising other gender roles. As Nicole Ward Jouve reflects in *No-one’s Mother*, “in motherhood the need cannot come first. It can have at best only part self, part time. Motherhood means being interruptible, responsive [and] responsible” (280). Therefore, the Blessed Virgin Mother in Duffy’s poem is absorbed into the mechanism of an interruptible, responsive and responsible motherhood, and her growing agitation reveals her suppressed aspiration for breaking out from, or at least moderate, her servile maternity that her child’s otherness challenges in multiple ways. The Virgin’s maternal anxiety grows along with her weariness and absorption in the swamping demands of child care.

The Holy Mother’s maternal care is immense not only because her infant is spiritual and the Son of the Almighty, but because she, a female subject, has to nurture a son, a male being, and transmit to him the norms of that dominant order from where by means of her sex she is ultimately exiled. The Virgin’s maternity can be defined not only as responsible and sacrificial, but also empty and impregnated by the phallogentrism. As Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* observes, “mothers are not powerful, but powerless under patriarchy. Mothering has been affected by patriarchy and it has controlled, even killed, the mothers. [...] Maternal ideal and perfection could emerge [only] with the overthrow of patriarchy” (119). Since the Virgin’s son is to be the future Messiah, whose doctrines determine the deeds of many peoples, his nurture will occupy at every front the mother’s attention. As Jesus arrives in the Virgin’s life, she herself is to become in the Holy Family an all-powerful phallic but empty mother, who raises her divine child for what he is destined. Nancy Chodorow and Susan Contratto as elaborate on the “all-powerful mother” remark, in *The Fantasy of the Perfect Mother*, the followings:

A woman is the parental person who is every infant's first love, first witness, and first boss, the person who exists for the infant as the first representative of the flesh. [...] Women's exclusive mothering [...] fosters particular kinds of destructive power and ensures patriarchal control of that power. In short, women's all-powerful mothering shapes the child's entire psychological, social, and political experience and is responsible for a species life that "cancerous, out of control." (194)

The Virgin Mary, in Duffy's representation, is an all-powerful phallic but self-alienated mother because she has to nurture and teach the son of the Almighty the absolute. Also, she alone has to cope with the parental difficulties without a prevailing paternal role. "Joseph kept away, carving himself/ a silent Pinocchio out in the workshed. He said/ he was a simple man and hadn't dreamed of this" (53), says the Holy Mother. As these lines manifest the Virgin Mary is left alone in her maternal crisis and denied support from her husband. Joseph's detachment explicitly contradicts the Virgin Mary's maternal passion, and this conflict implies the breakdown of their matrimony and Joseph's position as a husband incapable and undesirable from the woman's perspective. Her responsible motherhood turns their relationship into the formal role pattern of Husband and Wife and brings her closer to the brink of emotional breakdown. Joseph's paternal incapability and his ignorance of the Virgin's traumatised reality "implies a 'simple man' who had not bargained for being the foster father of the Almighty but wished for an own son. His silent Pinocchio indicates that he feels he has to create [his child] in his own image, through a means with which he is familiar" (Woods 29). The maternal care and passion, on the contrary, accompany the child across his entire life, since the mother is the infant's first love and the absence of her cannot be compared to the father's. The Virgin Mary as the sole nurturer in this extreme, responsible parenthood necessarily amplifies the demands of her conscience, and questions whether she fulfils the role of a good phallic mother. That the Holy Mother alone is to provide her infant with what he needs to become the future Prophet in a dominant and suppressive order entails an instability and dissolved positionality for her in addition to an overwhelming maternity.

In the following the poem demonstrates that "We heard him [infant Jesus] through the window/ heard the smacks which made us peep. What we saw/ was commonplace enough. But afterwards, we wondered/ why the infant did not cry. And why the Mother did" (53). The Virgin's anxiety and emotional crisis culminate and, while punishing her child, she bursts out crying. Through the use of the onomatopoeic "smacks" and "peep"

Duffy escalates the effects of the violent situation and by referring to the people who witness the maternal aggression as “we” also creates tension. The collective voice of the small village community reflects on the mother’s violence in the form of gossips and speculations about the causes of her crying. As her husband Joseph’s ignorance had been pointed out previously, she may be weeping because she has to live in an unbalanced marriage with an incapable, neglecting husband and practise the undesired role of wife. But as the following lines imply, “Mary’s child/ would bring her sorrow...better far to have a son/ who gurgled nonsense at your breast. *Googoo. Googoo*” (53), her hysteria can also reveal her suppressed aspiration for breaking out from, or at least moderate, the complexity of her gender role as a mother that her child’s otherness challenges in multiple ways. As Woods remarks, “the Virgin Mary could want to free herself from her child that is an oddity and embarrassment to her [and] is liable to cause for his parents sorrow” (29). Her tears are therefore the sign, beyond the breakdown of her marriage, of her implied desire for dissolving the chaos of her gender positions by giving up the problematic motherhood for what makes her more complete and sovereign. “The poem’s dilemma is clear. It is about a woman who tries to react against a convention that is stifling her identity,” Alison Smith affirms (32). Duffy’s “The Virgin Punishing the Infant,” by negotiating both the woman’s reasons for abusing her child and her aspirations for freeing herself from the ramparts of the motherhood and wifeness, rips off the surface of everyday life to reveal insufficiencies beneath the construction of female gender roles.

Duffy’s poem “Whoever She Was” similarly to “The Virgin Punishing the Infant” challenges the conventional paradigm of female gender roles and introduces the dilemma created by women’s multiple positions. The poem won first prize in the National Poetry Competition in 1983. A brief review under the title *Woman Wins* says in connection with the poem: “this is quite an effective evocation of some eerie moments in motherhood” (qtd. in Rees-Jones 9). As this remark reinforces, Duffy’s poem reflects in an extravagant way the issue of maternity and confronts the dissolved positionality it causes for women. What the female lyrical voice declares at the very beginning of the poem, “They see me always as a flickering figure/ on a shilling screen. Not real” (14), implies the complexity of her identity that results both from her wearisome mothering, maternal fatigue and the multiplication of her gender roles. The first line, through its surrealistic images, reflects the same uncertainty the title “Whoever She Was” itself carries, and foreshadows the emotional dilemma that the female lyrical voice experiences while being mother, wife and

trying to be a sovereign woman at the same time. Her exclamation “Not real” is reminiscent of the woman’s demented wailing and cry in “The Virgin Punishing the Infant” and aims to react against the overwhelming social and domestic laws that interfere in her personal choice of gender roles.

As the following line demonstrates, “My hands, still wet, sprout wooden pegs” (14), the woman is completely absorbed in the monotonous mechanism of swamping domesticity that necessarily and conventionally defines her as a mother and housewife. Thomas aptly remarks that “the veiled reference to the myth of Daphne, ‘My hands, still wet, sprout wooden pegs,’ suggests the extent to which the subject is enmired and restricted by the forms that shape her subjectivity” (130). By means of the surrealistic juxtapositions the female speaker is also able to project her emotional landscape onto the world. Deryn Rees-Jones observes, “Surrealism, through its juxtaposition of the objective and the subjective, the conscious and the unconscious, inner and outer realities, allows experiencing the anxiety that fuels its creation” (8). The woman’s physical and emotional weariness the surrealist images expensively depict manifests the dangers of committing herself completely to the continuous demands of her domestic context, which predestines her to be torn among different gender roles. In the subsequent parts of the poem Duffy amplifies this multiple positionality and dramatises the woman’s responding to conventional domestic laws: “I smell the apples/ burning as I hang the washing out/ Mummy, say the little voices of the ghosts/ of children on the telephone. Mummy” (14). These lines, through their olfactory “smell,” kinaesthetic “hang out” and auditory “voices of the ghost” imagery, reinforce that the woman is both swamped by the monotony of her household tasks and the responsibility of maternal care. Like the Holy Mother in “The Virgin Punishing the Infant” the woman in “Whoever She Was” is forced beyond the ramparts of an overwhelming maternity, and her growing anxiety and physical weariness, aggravated by the Gothic-like calling of the children’s crying echoes “Mummy,” indicate the self-limiting effects of her maternal role. As Nicole Ward Jouve reflects, “the Mother becomes she whose haunting presence estranges women from themselves” (278). “Six silly ladies torn in half by baby fists. When they think of me, I’m bending over them at night to kiss” (14): in these lines through a powerful surrealist image Duffy escalates the process in which the woman is split by her domestic, especially maternal, roles and captures what the critical review *Woman Wins* described as the eerie moments of motherhood. The above extract also expresses inherently a collective female consolation, the common share of

difficulties in their multiple gender roles, which therefore entails women's aspiration for rearticulating who they really are.

As the following lines suggest, "A row of paper dollies, cleaning wounds/ or boiling eggs for soldiers. The chant/ of magic words repeatedly. I do not know" (14), the woman trapped in the monotonous acts of, accentuated by the adverb "repeatedly," domesticity rethinks what these laws dictate she should be or do. By claiming "I do not know" the female speaker supervises the potentials the domestic traditions offer for her and negotiates whether what she actually desires for is preparing "paper dollies, cleaning wounds or boiling eggs for soldiers" (14). In other words, the woman in Duffy's poem reconsiders "the notion that women need not follow conventional patterns to fulfil responsibilities" (Smith 26). By posing the rhetorical question, "Where does it hurt?" (14), in her poem, Duffy extends the scope of the woman's scepticism and faces both the anxieties that the unbalance of her different gender roles causes and her aspirations for terminating that dilemma. "A scrap of echo clings/ to the bramble bush. My maiden name/ sounds wrong" (14): these lines imply that the woman by reconsidering the principles of her gender roles recognises that she is determined as a wife or mother and her maiden name, her sovereign female self, "clings to the bramble bush"(14), in other words is suppressed. The woman in "Whoever She Was," Alison Smith observes, "[is] poised between the attraction of being an all-martyring essence of woman and an autonomous individual" (27). As the following lines demonstrate, "Whoever she was, forever their wide eyes watch her/ as she shapes a church and steeple in the air" (14), Duffy faces the imperialism of social rules that expect the woman to get married, practise the domestic roles marriage entails in the patriarchal society. In connection with the laws of domesticity the poet also scrutinises ways to disconnect or dislocate certain female positions, thus making room for the woman's individual sovereign self and creating coherence within her gender roles. By implicating the image of church and steeple Duffy tries to answer why "[the woman's] maiden name sounds wrong" (14). What the woman in Duffy's poem needs in order to understand herself, as Christopher Whyte observes, "is an absence, of the male, of the phallus, with a simultaneous presence of what at once demands and defies articulation" (222). Therefore, what at once needs articulation in "Whoever She Was" is unequivocally the woman's own personal choice of gender roles that without the prescription of suppressive social conventions may dislocate matrimony or maternity if that is not what the woman aspires to practise. Duffy re-examines the woman's potentials

and negotiates whether she can or cannot fulfil herself in isolation from her husband or children. The concluding lines with a final abstract surrealist picture, “*You open your dead eyes to look in the mirror/ which they are holding to your mouth*” (14, emphasis in the original), epitomise the poet’s attempts to rethink the multiplicity of female positions and state that the woman in order to fulfil herself, and rearticulate her different gender roles at the same time, has to face her own self and realise who she is and who she wants to be.

Carol Ann Duffy in her poems “The Virgin Punishing the Infant” and “Whoever She Was” reflects women’s multi-layered difficulties to bring into symbiosis their different gender roles in view of fixed social conventions and dogmatic limitations; the servile and self-sacrificing mother, the humble and obedient wife as well as the sovereign female individual, which all are associated with woman’s socially-determined self. The female speaker of the poems as trying to rearticulate her personal context and potentials inevitably confronts the suppressive social and domestic laws, which dictate who she is supposed to be but deliberately fail to declare who she wants to be. In her dilemma concerning the imposed multiple positions the female image in Duffy’s poem has to overcome the swamping demands of maternity and/or matrimony that disturb the balance of her gender roles, and which evoke such dramatic occurrences as maternal weariness and fatigue, agitation and frustration, and as it is revealed in “The Virgin Punishing the Infant,” violence and infant abuse. By depicting these maternal images in her poems Duffy is trying to rip off the surface of cruel realities, and breaks with conventions and creates harmony in gender roles. The poet dislocates certain positions in her female characters’ gender identity and reveals the aspiration for a fulfilled feminine self that should rely on nothing but personal choice.

Conclusion

Carol Ann Duffy has been at the forefront of what may be described as an explosion in the late twentieth-century Scottish poetic scene, since “she has brought an eclectic range of influences [through] her postmodern sensibility” which is the key to her poetics “plural in its forms and voices” (Rees-Jones 1). Duffy’s experiments with a series of individual female voices, many on the margins of experience, allow the identification of an explicit feminist perspective even when the speaking voice is male. She is sensitive to the oppressed and places in her poems the marginalised centre stage, thus giving voice to the hitherto voiceless. This privileged feminist perspective in Duffy’s aesthetics is remarked on by Woods as the following: “Through making individual women’s often either forgotten or disregarded voices heard, [Duffy] builds up what amounts to an orchestra of individual women’s voices resulting in a collective female chorus” (68). Duffy deploys purely feminine as well as matrifocal perspectives in her poetics to deal with a wide range of issues in her oeuvre, such as domestic violence, transgressive sexuality, alienation and loss, emotional and mental abuse. On the whole, the exploration into women’s gender politics has been the hallmark of her poetry. The Scottish Poet Laureate’s explicit concerns with gender reflect the New Generation Female Poets’ overall attempts to rearticulate dogmatic gender paradigms and binary gender oppositions that involve female stereotypes.

It is the tension-laden encounter between the female individual and her suppressive social context that impregnate Duffy’s poetic texts, and the transgression the woman displays in order to subvert its gender laws testifies to the poet’s clear commitment to challenging conventional gender politics. The Irish poet Eavan Boland’s following statement in *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* manifests what will undoubtedly remain the distinctive voice of women poetry in general, and Carol Ann Duffy’s in particular: “I have come to believe that the woman poet is an emblematic figure in poetry now [...] because she internalises the stresses and truth of poetry at a particular moment. Her project is therefore neither marginal nor specialist. It is a project that concerns all of her poetry, all that leads into it in the past and everywhere it is going in the future” (232). Duffy’s oeuvre is a model for the contemporary Scottish poetry and the subversiveness she represents also remains an example for future women’s writing. By revealing the unheard cries and disregarded voices and gospels of distinctive female selves the poet holds a rosary tight in her hands, because in her poems every woman of every time deserves a prayer.

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Appendix

Picture1. Henry Moore: “Woman Seated in the Underground, 1941” (1941)



Gouache, pen, ink wash, watercolour,
crayon on paper; 750 x 642 x 26 mm
in Tate Gallery, London

Picture 2. Roland Penrose: “Winged Domino: Portrait of Valentine” (1938)



Oil on canvas; 65 1/4 x 49 1/2
in The Penrose Collection, London

Picture 3. Georges Braque: "Large Nude" (1908)



Oil on canvas; 55 1/4 x 39 1/2
in Alex Maguy Gallery, Paris

Picture 4. Max Ernst: “The Virgin Punishing the Infant” (1926)



Oil on canvas; 77 1/4 x 51 1/4
in Museum Ludwig, Köln