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Research Article

Voices Of Subversion: A Psychoanalytic And Feminist Analysis Of "Mrs Beast," "Queen Herod," And "Mrs Lazarus" In Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife*

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ABSTRACT

Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife* reclaims the voices of women who have been historically overshadowed or silenced in myths, biblical narratives, and literature. By employing dramatic monologues, Duffy allows female characters to articulate their experiences, desires, and inner conflicts. This article examines three key poems, "Mrs Beast," "Queen Herod," and "Mrs Lazarus," through feminist and psychoanalytic lenses. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's concept of woman as "Other," Freud's theories of the unconscious, and Jung's archetypes, the analysis explores how Duffy's heroines challenge patriarchal narratives while revealing the complexities of female identity, sexuality, and power.

Keywords: Carol Ann Duffy, *The World's Wife*, feminist critique, psychoanalysis, female identity, gender roles, patriarchal narratives, dramatic monologue, female voice, sexuality, subversion.

Carol Ann Duffy, the first female Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom (2009–2019), is widely celebrated for her ability to blend accessible language with bold feminist themes. Her 1999 poetry collection, *The World's Wife*, rewrites myths, historical accounts, and fairy tales from a female perspective, giving voice to women who were traditionally silenced or misrepresented. Through dramatic monologues, Duffy offers intimate and defiant portrayals of women such as Mrs Beast, Queen Herod, and Mrs Lazarus. These characters are not passive figures of history but complex individuals navigating power, grief, and desire. Feminist critics such as Simone de Beauvoir argue that women have long been defined as "the Other," existing about male figures and rarely allowed to define themselves (Beauvoir 26). Duffy's work challenges this notion, allowing her female speakers to take control of their narratives. At the same time, psychoanalytic theory, particularly Freud's tripartite model of the psyche (id, ego, and superego) and Jung's archetypes, offers a deeper understanding of the unconscious drives and conflicts shaping these women's voices. This article combines these two critical approaches to analyze how Duffy reconstructs female subjectivity in "Mrs Beast," "Queen Herod," and "Mrs Lazarus."

In "Mrs Beast," Duffy transforms the traditional "Beauty and the Beast" tale by granting Beauty, now Mrs Beast, a powerful, self-assured voice. From the opening line *"These myths going round, these legends, fairytales, / I'll put them straight"* (Duffy 1–2), Mrs Beast asserts her authority, claiming the right to correct the distorted stories told by men. Her tone is confident, irreverent, and unapologetic, setting the stage for a narrative that celebrates female autonomy and sexual agency. Mrs Beast references iconic women such as Helen of Troy, Cleopatra, and Mona Lisa, highlighting how history and myth have reduced women to symbols of beauty or tragedy:

…. .so when you stare
into my face – Helen's face, Cleopatra's,
Queen of Sheba's, Juliet's – then, deeper,
gaze into my eyes – Nefertiti's, Mona Lisa's,
Garbo's eyes – think again. (Duffy 2–6).

These allusions reinforce Beauvoir's argument that women are often objectified and defined by male desire. Duffy, however, reclaims these women as powerful presences, urging readers to recognize the injustices behind their stories. A feminist reading of the poem underscores Mrs Beast's rejection of romantic suffering. She mocks the Little Mermaid's self-mutilation for a prince:

The Little Mermaid slit
her shining, silver tail in two…
all for a Prince, a pretty boy, a charming one
who'd dump her in the end. (Duffy 6–11).

This critique exposes the harmful narratives that teach women to endure pain for male approval. From a psychoanalytic standpoint, Mrs Beast's preference for the Beast over a prince represents the integration of her "shadow self," as described by Jung. The Beast, an embodiment of raw, instinctual desire, allows her to confront and embrace the suppressed parts of her psyche. She asserts her independence:

Myself I came to the House of the Beast
no longer a girl, knowing my own mind,
my own gold stashed in the bank,
my own black horse at the gates
ready to carry me off at one wrong word" (Duffy 15–19).

Here, wealth and readiness to leave signify self-possession and a refusal to conform to traditional female passivity. Freud's theory of the id, ego, and superego also resonates in the poem. The Beast represents the id's instinctual drives, while societal expectations of a "Prince" mirror the superego's moral demands. Mrs Beast's ego mediates these forces, leading her to embrace pleasure and autonomy rather than repression. Her candid remark, *"What you want to do is find yourself a Beast. The sex / is better"* (Duffy 14–15), asserts female sexual pleasure as a source of empowerment rather than shame. The poem's closing lines solidify her dominance and self-love: *"Bring me the Beast for the night. / Bring me the wine-cellar key. Let the less-loving one be me"* (Duffy 91–92). By inverting W. H. Auden's sentiment "Let the more loving one be me," Duffy prioritizes female desire and agency, rejecting the expectation that women should sacrifice for love. Mrs Beast is not a victim but a commanding, self-aware figure who rewrites the narrative of romantic relationships.

In "Queen Herod," Duffy revisits the biblical story of King Herod, infamous for ordering the Massacre of the Innocents, through the perspective of his wife. However, in this reimagining, Queen Herod, not the king, is the one who initiates the violence, driven by a fierce maternal instinct. The poem begins with an image of tender motherhood as she presents her daughter to the visiting wise women: *"Silver and gold, the babe in my arms."* Yet this tenderness quickly transforms into ferocity when the queens foretell the birth of a male child "The Heartbreaker. The Ladykiller. / Mr. Right," who will one day threaten her daughter's happiness and independence (Duffy).

Her declaration *"No man, I swore, / will make her shed one tear"* reflects both love and fear. Psychoanalytically, Queen Herod's violent reaction can be understood as projection, a defense mechanism where inner fears are displaced onto external threats. By ordering her men to "kill each mother's son. / Do it. Spare not one," she externalizes her anxieties about male dominance and power. Jung's archetype of the "Great Mother" is particularly relevant here. The Great Mother is both nurturing and destructive, embodying the dual power to create and to destroy. Queen Herod's lullabies, underscored by the ominous sounds of "terrible horses" that "thunder and drum" (Duffy 7), capture this duality. Her maternal love is both protective and ruthless, a weapon against the patriarchal forces that would harm her daughter.

From a feminist standpoint, Queen Herod subverts the idealized image of the passive, selfless mother. She recognizes that within a patriarchal society, her daughter's autonomy and happiness are perpetually at risk. The poem's final lines, *"We wade through blood for our sleeping girls. / We have daggers for eyes,"* use the collective "we" to extend her protective instinct to all mothers of daughters. As Simone de Beauvoir notes, women are often defined by roles imposed upon them; Queen Herod, however, asserts her agency, even if it means embracing violence (Beauvoir 267).

Duffy's portrayal of Queen Herod challenges traditional biblical morality, asking the reader to reconsider the nature of maternal love. Is her violence a moral failing, or is it an extreme form of resistance against a male-dominated world? By framing these questions, Duffy creates a character who is both empathetic and unsettling, a figure who blurs the boundaries between protector and aggressor.

In "Mrs Lazarus," Duffy retells the biblical story of Lazarus's resurrection, shifting the focus from the miraculous act to the emotional turmoil of Lazarus's wife. The poem begins with intense mourning: *"I howled, shrieked, clawed at the burial stones, / ripped the cloth I was married in from my breasts…"* (Duffy 44). Mrs Lazarus's grief is visceral, manifesting in physical and psychological breakdown. She becomes skeletal, describing herself as a "nun" devoted to the ritual of loss, suggesting that her mourning has become a dark form of worship.

Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholia" provides insight into this stage of the poem. In melancholia, the mourner internalizes the lost object, allowing grief to consume their identity (Freud 154). Mrs Lazarus's fixation on her husband's memory illustrates this state of psychic entrapment. However, as time passes, she begins to heal: *"There came a time when his name / was no longer a certain spell / for his face."* His presence fades from the house, becoming "legend, language," until he is merely a memory.

The turning point arrives when Lazarus is resurrected. Instead of joy, Mrs Lazarus reacts with horror: *"He lived. I saw the horror on his face. / I breathed his stench; my bridegroom in his rotting shroud…"* (Duffy 45). This moment exemplifies Freud's concept of the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*), where something familiar (her husband) becomes terrifying due to its unnatural return. For Mrs Lazarus, resurrection is not a miracle but a violation of the emotional closure she has achieved.

From a feminist perspective, the poem critiques the assumption that a woman's life revolves around her husband. Mrs Lazarus has rebuilt her identity and found a sense of freedom, only for Lazarus's return to threaten her independence. In this sense, his resurrection symbolizes the return of patriarchal expectations that deny women the right to move on from loss. Jungian theory also illuminates the poem's exploration of the shadow self. Lazarus's decaying body is a manifestation of the repressed past that Mrs Lazarus no longer wants to confront. The conflict between her present happiness and the intrusion of the past underscores the psychological cost of unresolved trauma.

Through "Mrs Beast," "Queen Herod," and "Mrs Lazarus," Carol Ann Duffy reclaims the voices of women who were previously confined to silence or secondary roles. Each of these dramatic monologues examines the tensions between love, power, and identity, blending feminist critique with psychoanalytic depth. Mrs Beast embraces her shadow self and redefines romantic desire on her terms. Queen Herod, embodying both nurturing and destructive forces, subverts traditional notions of motherhood to protect her daughter's future. Mrs Lazarus, grappling with grief and memory, challenges the assumption that resurrection is inherently joyous, instead asserting her right to heal and move on.

Duffy's work powerfully echoes Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that women must reclaim their subjectivity and resist the constraints of male-centered narratives. Through *The World's Wife*, she crafts voices for women who have historically been silenced, reframing their experiences as complex and self-determined. By integrating psychoanalytic themes such as Freud's concepts of mourning, the uncanny, and the dynamic conflict between id, ego, and superego, Duffy unveils the hidden emotional layers of her characters. Jung's archetypes, particularly the shadow and the Great Mother, further illuminate the dualities of desire, fear, and maternal power that shape these voices. Each poem thus becomes a psychological as well as a cultural act of resistance, revealing how personal and collective histories intersect in the female psyche. Ultimately, *The World's Wife* is not only a reinterpretation of myths and biblical tales but also a manifesto of subversion and renewal, highlighting female autonomy, strength, and the enduring power of women to reclaim their narratives and identities.

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