

“Talking like Men”: Interpreting Revisionist Mythmaking in Carol Ann Duffy’s *The World’s Wife*

Rumana Rahman

Assistant Professor, English Discipline, Khulna University, Bangladesh

Abstract

Myths unravel an overwhelmingly patriarchal order in society and consequently validate the androcentrism of language. As cultural texts, they show and legitimize the victimization of women. “Revisionist mythmaking” is a process, suggested by Alicia Ostriker, which tends to subvert the patriarchal structure of the cultural elements and “correct” the gender stereotypes of women. Carol Ann Duffy’s *The World’s Wife* is a remarkable addition to the tradition of revisionist mythmaking in English literature. Almost all the poems focus on hitherto invisible and “silenced” female counterparts of mythical and quasi-mythical characters. The ending of the stories remains unchanged, but the perspectives change as Duffy subverts the male-subject position into a female one. This paper argues that here the female speakers attain superiority mainly through speech and considers it the main strength of the process of revisionist mythmaking. Duffy’s use of dramatic monologue, as the dominant genre in this collection, helps to capture the essence of “performance” through the speech in a brilliant way. The female-subject speakers give commands which are meant to be executed; they narrate acts of violence, stories of victimization, and experience of motherhood. They adopt colloquial language and masculine expressions which make the subversion more effective. Austin’s speech-act theory has been used to explain the locutionary effect of the speeches. The paper also draws upon Judith Butler’s notion of performativity, as it helps to theorize the revision of myth that occurs through subversion of the masculine discourse.

Keywords: act, gender, myth, revision, speech, subversion

Mythological narratives constitute a palatable framework for inserting patriarchal codes in the lives of women. “Revisionist mythmaking,” on the other hand, has become an effective tool for women writers to undo the hierarchical injustice practiced in those narratives by offering a re-survey and a review of the discrimination and subordination on the basis of gender and sexuality. Carol Ann Duffy’s celebrated collection *The World’s Wife* (henceforth *TWW*) retells mythical stories from the perspective of the women who had been either silenced or invisible in the popularly known masculine version of the myths. Just like myths, language also operates through a set or pattern of rules and structures that shape our psychology with almost equal influence. This study tries to establish that the effectiveness of the revisionist mythmaking in *TWW* lies mostly in the linguistic act.

In “The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and the Revisionist Mythmaking,” Alicia Ostriker explains the process of revisionist mythmaking:

[w]henver a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible. (72)

Ostriker further details how

[o]ld stories are changed [...] by female experience, so that they can no longer stand as foundations of collective male fantasy. Instead [...] they are corrections; they are representations of what women find divine and demonic in themselves; they are retrieved images of what women have collectively and historically suffered; in some cases they are instructions for survival. (73)

Duffy's *TWW* can definitely stand out as one of the finest examples of this process. The collection presents an array of mythical, quasi-mythical, and historical women – mostly the wives of superior men – and we hear their stories in terms of their “supposedly” lived realities. Where the world commonly knows the men as heroes, scholars, and high achievers, they turn out to be obnoxious poets, bad lovers, greedy capitalists, spiteful or boring husbands, devils, apes, and even pigs to the women related to them. The women, on the other hand, are not essentially angelic or endowed with all the fair features of human characteristics; but much more sensible, pragmatic, and high-spirited than their male counterparts.

The poetry collection of Carol Ann Duffy has been mostly read from a feminist perspective. Avril Horner, along with many other critics, argues that Duffy aims to challenge the tradition of Western philosophy by demonstrating “how it underpins particular forms of patriarchy, and as a consequence, and how both sexes have been damaged by it in different ways” and also considers her a “feminist postmodernist writer” (99). She traces an emotional chronology in *TWW* where the womenfolk of this collection gradually move from “listening to speaking, from silence to eloquence, from weakness to strength, from marginal to central, from passivity to action” (112). Jane Thomas, on the other hand, concentrates more on the performance of gender in her poems and uses the notion of Butler's performativity to explain the relation between gender and language, “The act of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once re-enactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established. Many of them represented in, and by, linguistic terms” (123).

Duffy executes the remaking of myth by bringing change in the area where language operates. The first and foremost effect is carried out when she deploys dramatic and interior monologue in presenting mythical stories. According to David Kennedy, if Duffy's preferred poetic form is the dramatic monologue, it is because it allows the poet to explore the breach between what is said and the person speaking, to explore “the gap between ‘what it is like’ and ‘what it is like in words’ by playing with the split between her speakers and what they speak, or, more often, what is ‘spoken’ through them” (227). In both types of monologues, the form helps in disclosing three important issues: the psychology of the speaker subject (attitude towards the male counterparts in the case of *TWW*), the reception of the speaker's rhetoric by the object (mostly male in *TWW*), and the penultimate effect in the world external to the monologues.

Technically, dramatic monologues offer a convenient framework for staging the performance of the role-reversals of the mythical women. We can study this performance as an execution of speech acts. The idea that speaking refers to doing something forms the basis of the speech-act theory which originated with J. L. Austin and has been further developed by John Searle and others. For Searle, especially, “the illocutionary act constitutes the basic unit of human linguistic communication” (107). Whereas illocutionary acts proceed by way of conventions, perlocutionary acts proceed by way of consequences (Searle 107). For example, in the sentence “Keep quiet,” the intended effect is that the interlocutor stops talking or making noise but it is not definitive; whereas “I got him quiet” shows that the perlocutionary effect is achieved by force. Both the illocutionary

and the perlocutionary as utterances that perform, act either in the course of the utterance itself or as a consequence of the utterance. Duffy combines both speech acts to dramatize the role reversals in *TWW*.

In the final section of her seminal essay, Alicia Ostriker formulates a kind of pattern through which renowned women poets have accomplished revisionist mythmaking. She considers the intertwining of “multiple voices” in those narrations as the most significant and widely used technique. The poet-speaker is hidden underneath the overpowering voices of individuals in *TWW*, and the dramatic monologue appears to be the most perfect form to contain the voices.

We may now move to the interpretation of “voices,” i.e., how Duffy carries out her project of mythmaking at the linguistic level. The most notable feature of the language in *TWW* is its colloquialism, which has been a recurring feature in revisionist mythmaking (Ostriker 87). It operates at two levels: it brings down the status of myth as a part of “high culture,” and therefore subverts it, and it makes the language more accessible and modern. There are 30 poems in *TWW* with 30 different individual female speakers. Most of the poems are discussed under subcategories on the basis of the speech-acts.

Speech in Action

Women belonging to this section assert their agency through the perlocutionary force of their speech. The reversal of masculine discourse takes place when the male listeners act in accordance with the (female) speakers’ utterances. The readers can assess the emphatic force of the utterance because the “consequences” of the speech lie in the ending of the mythical stories that are already known.

The discussion can begin with “Mrs. Aesop.” Mrs. Aesop, the frustrated wife of the renowned fable maker, devises her own fable of the “little cock that wouldn’t crow,” signifying his incapacity to please her sexually: “*I’ll cut off your tail, all right, I said, to save my face./*That shut him up. I laughed last, longest” (26-27). “Eurydice” explores the dynamics of creativity and ridicules the so-called “male” literary tradition. The female subject speaker turns the table when she asserts that she herself did not wish to return to the land of the living with Orpheus – the egoistic legendary poet-singer – and tricked him:

My voice shook when I spoke –
Orpheus, your poem’s a masterpiece.
I’d love to hear it again ...
He was smiling modestly
When he turned,
When he turned and looked at me. (108-113)

The readers already know the penultimate effect of “looking back,” but this time we know that the course of action was the making of Eurydice herself. Looking becomes a violent action in the case of mythical Medusa. Duffy’s Medusa feels cheated and spiteful towards her husband: “*Wasn’t I beautiful?/Wasn’t I fragrant and young?/Look at me now*” (40-42). The assertion has multiple meanings. It might be a frantic urge to the husband to turn towards her, or it might reflect the intention of the speaker to petrify the husband or it is a threatening challenge to the listeners/readers who know how scorned she is.

Being authoritative is not always the strategy for empowered women. In some cases, Duffy adopts language in a tricky way to show how speech turns into action. We find a plain diary entry in “Mrs. Darwin”: “I said to Him –/Something about that Chimpanzee over there reminds me of/you” (3-5). Duffy ensures that Mrs. Darwin is credited as the creator of the “theory of evolution” in a rather humorous manner, and subverts the popular myth.

Another witty subversion is devised in “Frau Freud.” She begins with her own perception and then proceeds to the views of other women to support her argument, parodying the methods of Sigmund Freud: “ladies, dear ladies, the average penis – not pretty .../the squint of its envious solitary eye ... one’s feeling of/pity ...” (13-15). Duffy re-interprets Freud’s “penis envy” in the poem – it is not pretty, not a lack in woman, rather an object of pity.

“Pygmalion’s Bride,” on the other hand, tricks Pygmalion into abandoning her. In Duffy’s version of this myth, the statue is not really a statue, but “plays” one. She does not desire Pygmalion, but Pygmalion’s relentless pursuit makes her devise a new strategy to cope with him:

So I changed tack,
Grew warm, like candle wax, kissed back,
Was soft, was pliable,
Began to moan
[...]
begged for his child.
and at the climax
Screamed my head off –
all an act. (39-48)

The expression of sexuality through speech and utterance threatens Pygmalion and the perlocutionary effect is that he leaves her which the bride finds quite pleasing and does not complain about.

Sexuality also remains a crucial issue in “From Mrs. Tiresias.” Tiresias turns into a woman, as he does in the myth. In Duffy’s version, he is a regular conventional suburban man, quite unlike the prophetic enigmatic Tiresias from the original myth, who cannot cope with the transformation because of his male vanity. The wife, on the other hand, tries to accommodate him, compassionately treating him in a “sisterly” manner. As the relationship deteriorates, we find Mrs. Tiresias opting for a new beginning by bringing a third person into the relationship: “*And this is my lover*, I said” (76). She is the first speaker in this collection who welcomes a lesbian relation when a heterosexual relation has failed. And Duffy makes the assertion much more effective by voicing the statement in direct speech instead of a reported one.

The last and the strongest persona in this section would be “Queen Herod” whose identity as a queen is overshadowed by the identity of an over-protective mother who can be merciless:

Take men and horses,
Knives, swords, cutlasses.
Ride East from here
And kill each mother’s son.
Do it. Spare not one. (73-77)

This, again, is a direct speech act reflecting her authority.

Voicing Victimization

In this section we can include a long list of suffering wives who, mostly in the form of interior monologues, narrate their version of the stories. The discussion can begin with the estranged wives who have been awaiting their husbands for a long time and the focus is on the spiteful language that they use to voice out their resentment.

Mrs. Sisyphus is portrayed as the wife of a mindless workaholic. Sisyphus is a “jerk” and “a dork” (21). Mrs. Icarus also expresses extreme disgust at the stupidity of her husband’s legendary flight towards the sun and calls him “a total, utter, absolute, Grade A pillock” (5). “Mrs. Faust” is presented as an unusual woman in this collection who is quite indifferent and unloving towards her spouse. Her statement at the very end reveals her state of utter frustration and disgust: “the clever, cunning, callous bastard/didn’t have a soul to sell” (134-135).

The legendary Circe – who is a scorned lover – calls most men “pigs” in “Circe.” She revels at her knowledge of the differences between “tusker” and “snout,” or “hogs” and “runts,” showing her adept knowledge of different men’s personalities and traits (47). Mrs. Midas is threatened by the transformation of Midas and is separated willingly. At the end, Midas is just a “fool” and the personification of “Pure selfishness” to her (13).

Another significant section of wives are those who have internalized the pain of separation from their husbands and considered it a chance to restart their lives. “Penelope,” “Mrs. Rip Van Winkle,” and “Mrs. Lazarus” would fall into this category. Penelope is the legendary wife of the Greek hero Ulysses, who had been the mythical epitome of a loyal wife. In Duffy’s version, she finds “a lifetime’s industry” in needlework and embroidery, and sincerely prepares for the next stitch when she hears “a far-too-late familiar tread outside the door” (43). Mrs. Rip Van Winkle fuels her artistic creativity and considers the absence of her husband a boon: “But what was best,/ what hands-down beat the rest,/Was saying a none-too-fond farewell to sex” (113-115).

There is no trace of love left in Mrs. Lazarus for her reincarnated husband:

I breathed
His stench; my bridegroom in his rotting shroud,
Moist and dishevelled from the grave’s slack chew,
Croaking his cuckold name, disinherited, out of his time. (37-40)

In all three cases, the climactic illocutionary effect is produced with a combination of resentment and disgust at the arrival of the unwelcome husbands. These women shatter the patriarchal myth of self-sacrificing devoted wives.

Voicing Violence

Enacting violent actions and narrating them constitutes a powerful discourse in Duffy’s *TWW*. In retelling the acts of violence, the speaker achieves a kind of cathartic and liberating effect. The very first poem of the collection “Little Red Cap” retells the story of Little Red Riding Hood, the wolf here being the male poet, signifying the male literary tradition; an object to be eliminated in order to make a feminine discourse possible and meaningful: “I took an axe to the wolf/As he slept, one chop, scrotum to throat, and saw/The glistening, virgin white of my grandmother’s bones” (37-40). Salome is one woman in this collection who relishes in getting men killed: “Woke up with a head on the pillow beside me – whose? –/What did it matter?” (4-5).

In “Mrs. Beast,” Duffy recreates and transforms the mythical “Beauty,” and endows her with incredible toughness. All the words that she can find to compare with the beast are: “... a horse,

a ram, /an ape, a wolf, a dog, a donkey, dragon, dinosaur” (45). Duffy subverts the male tradition of dirty talk, playing Poker games and cards as she asserts, “We were a hard school, tough as fuck” (47). She justifies her abuse towards the beast (“turfing him out of bed”) as an act of vindication on behalf of the “tragic ladies” from history and myth.

“The Kray Sisters,” who also advocate solidarity and promote feminism in practice like “Mrs. Beast,” are the feminized versions of the real Kray twins in London around the seventies. They take pride in carrying out the legacy of their fictive grandmother, “a tough suffragette”; one of her achievements was keeping London safe for women. Their words are law, and their diction gangster-like: “Rule number One –/A boyfriend’s for Christmas, not just for life” (45-46).

Their acts of violence are implied, quite unlike “Mrs. Quasimodo.” She is very much in love with her husband initially but feels threatened on the arrival of a beautiful “other woman.” She would destroy Quasimodo’s most favorite musical instrument in order to hurt him the way he had hurt her. Her action reverberates ruthless murder:

I sawed and pulled and hacked.
I wanted silence back.
Get this:
When I was done,
And bloody to the wrist,
I squatted down among the murdered music of the bells
And pissed. (137-143)

“Delilah” is an adaptation of the biblical story of Delilah and Samson, where Delilah betrays Samson by cutting his locks of hair – which contained the source of his strength – to make him vulnerable to the Philistines for revenge. Duffy appropriates the myth by changing the intention of Delilah. His hair seems to signify not only his source of physical strength but also incapability towards the softer values in life. So she gets the scissors ready to “change” him for the better: “Then with deliberate, passionate hands/I cut every lock of his hair” (141-142). All actions belong to a perfect cause and effect framework, subverting the stereotypical notion of men as the reservoir of reason and rationality in *TWW* which is an important aspect of the performance of a linguistic act.

Voicing Motherhood

One important facet of Duffy’s revisionist effort is bringing the experience of motherhood to light. Her pregnancy and childbirth experiences echo Cixous’s urge to record the feminine experience of childbirth and pregnancy in feminine writing. “Thetis” and “Pope Joan” narrates the event of childbirth as an empowering moment. Duffy revises the myth of Thetis by transforming her into a modern woman who frantically tries to conform to the patriarchal codes by constantly changing “sizes” and “shapes.” In the climactic stanza the changes stop, indicating her ultimate attainment of maturity: “So I changed, I learned,/turned inside out – or that’s/how it felt when the child burst out” (46-48).

Motherhood is the ultimate sanctuary for the semi-mythical protagonist in “Pope Joan.” The story goes that she was the only woman who had the capacity to lead the Church but died during childbirth. The experience of childbirth is narrated like an act of “transubstantiation”:

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. (21-27)

The subversion becomes most effective when the speaker considers it a miracle which is exclusively hers – as opposed to Pope-ship which is exclusively the domain of men. Duffy adopts an indirect speech act, which, according to Searle, is used when someone wants to communicate a different meaning from the apparent surface meaning and she succeeds in presenting motherhood strongly.

So far we have seen how Duffy uses the power of speech-act to make her language fit to fulfill the agenda of revisionist mythmaking. The wives in *TWW* conform to and “re-enact” the patriarchal convention in the first place, as most of them are known by their husbands’ names and have a domestic aura around them when they start narrating their stories; but gradually the readers are shocked by their irreverent language, taboo and slang words and phrases, and insulting remarks. The patriarchal discourse that shapes the psychology of the readers typically associates masculinity with the expressions that Duffy makes her women speakers use. Thus the poet disrupts the linguistic signifying process that is inherent in the structure of Western myth. Duffy has fulfilled the “possibility” that Butler mentions:

In a sense, all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; ‘agency,’ then is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition. If the rules governing signification not only restrict, but enable the assertion of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility, i.e., new possibilities for gender that contest the rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms, then it is only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible. (129)

Carol Ann Duffy subverts the dominant form of subjectivity in *TWW*, uses the signifying process of the given patriarchal myth, and successfully revises it. The close reading of *TWW* helps us to conclude that the revisionist mythmaking, in this case, is a powerful act of linguistic performance.

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