

MIXING GENRES AND GENDERS: CAROL ANN DUFFY'S POSTMODERN SATIRE: *THE WORLD'S WIFE*¹

Pilar Abad
University of Valladolid

INTRODUCTION

The editors of the 1993 anthology entitled *The New Poetry* define the latter as a kind of poetry "... that is fresh in its attitudes, risk-taking in its address, and plural in its forms and voices..." (Hulse, Kennedy & Morley 1993:16). Most of this poetry is written by poets who, at the time, were officially appointed as New Gen Poets,² and seven years later (2001) are considered solid assets,³ an appreciation which comes down to our day. Some of them were eight *women-poets* whose poetry has been summed up as "... moving, entertaining, technically innovative, often brilliant..." (Dunmore 1995) and among them is the one who will be the focus of attention in this exposé: Carol Ann Duffy (1955-).

I have chosen Carol Ann Duffy as my subject as, undoubtedly, today's most widely acclaimed mainstream British *woman-poet*: "... The figurehead of New Generation ... Carol Ann has vindicated the faith people had in her then by becoming an indisputable popular poet alongside Heaney. The poet's poet in 1994, she is quite clearly now the People's (poet)..." (Forbes 2001:22). In 1999 she was candidate for the Laureate Poet's throne (after Heaney's resignation) and undeservedly relegated (in favour of Andrew Motion) mainly for political

¹ Conferencia pronunciada en el XXVIII Congreso internacional AEDEAN.

² See Longley, "How We Made the New Generation" (1994): 52-53; Forbes, "Talking About the New Generation" (1994): 4-6.

³ *Poetry Review* 91:1 (2001).

and gender reasons.⁴ Currently she holds a number of awards and poetry prizes, and a recently published book entitled *Modern Scottish Poetry* (Whyte 2004) includes only three *women*-poets: one of them is Carol Ann Duffy.

1. MIXING GENRES

Now, as stated in my title, to start with the first aspect of “mixing genres” I take the liberty of paraphrasing Jane Austen just to say that it seems a truth (almost) universally acknowledged that the Dramatic (and Interior) Monologues are both favourite forms in Carol Ann Duffy’s poetry collections, the former more specifically after Browning’s tradition (rather than Eliot’s) given Duffy’s mainly *naturalistic* approach as regards characterization (Michelis & Rowland 2003: 11-13).⁵

As we all know, the DM is a clear case of *genre hybridization*, a phenomenon that defines *postmodern*⁶ approaches to genre, according to the tenets of the Postmodern Theory of Genre,⁷ whose defining trait is the *substitution* of a static concept of genre (historical) for a *dynamic* one, hostile to the earlier given its proclivity to “classification and ‘purity’ of genres.” The new conceptualisation (dynamic) retains the essence of genre (the necessary immanence) whilst disguising it by means of a plurality of genre combinations. And this lays open the strong blurring effect which affects both generic boundaries and the lyric subject.⁸

The DM cleverly combines *lyric* and *dramatic* components without fusing them, as befits Postmodern Genre Theory (“... hybrid mixture... depends on the components remaining unfused...” Fowler: 252) i.e. this mixture has to leave

⁴ “...Andrew Motion is to succeed Ted Hughes as Poet Laureate. Downing Street will announce next week. Tony Blair has rejected the calls to appoint a modern-style ‘people’s poet’ and opted for a more traditional figure... Ms Duffy, a highly respectable Glasgow feminist known for her sparky verse, was considered too far outside the Establishment. She would have been the first woman laureate....” *The Times*, May 19, 1999 (1-4).

⁵ See also Abad 1992.

⁶ Let us remember that “... In postmodernity what seemed to be fixed and universal categories and certainty are replaced by a focus on difference, that there no longer are any agreed-upon cultural boundaries or certainties...” (Cashmore & Rojek 1999:6)

⁷ And according to the famous “reconceptualisation of genre” started out by Derrida’s “law of impurity” (“The Law of Genre” 1979) and Ralph Cohen’s “combinatory theory of genre” (“Genre Theory, Literary History and Historical Change” 1991) (See Ferreira Duarte 1999; Abad 2002).

⁸ See Abad 2002.

both components recognisable in their poetic effects, whilst assuming their respective generic potentialities (lyric and dramatic) in such a way that the DM (as well as the Interior Monologue) continue to be forms open to a variety of *tones* given the significant role of *speech* in both of them.

Besides I should remind the audience that Duffy is also, as she herself admits, prone to *narrative* modes: "... There are 30 women's voices in the book each voice taking up some untold story of the World's Wife I've ordered the poems so that together they carry a narrative ..." (Duffy 1999 *PBS Bulletin*:5) modes which she freely combines in her lyrics with the other two basic or universal generic ones (lyric and dramatic). In this respect she closely follows the trend of postmodern British poetry,⁹ which, as has been said, "... has undergone what Bakhtin calls "novelisation" in the sense that, like the novel, it is not generically stable but self-consciously incorporates other generic elements and expectations It is a hybrid form ..." (Gregson 1996:7).¹⁰ With regard to this, Linda Kinnahan has also emphasized Duffy's postmodernity given the poet's proclivity to both the preservation and the transgression of literary forms (248, 252).

In addition, Gregson highlights "stylistic *mélange*" (4) in postmodernist poetry, a phenomenon which, on the one hand, emphasizes stylistic variety, and, on the other, refers to "cultural polyphony" i.e. an awareness of voices "...that insist on their differences ... and draw attention to their class, gender, nationality or race ..." (5), and, in my view, Carol Ann Duffy is no exception in relation to both.

In short, these circumstances have produced, not only individual hybrid compositions in which Duffy combines the "purities" of different recognisable natural genres, but hybrid-full *collections* of poetry like *The World's Wife* (1999), which I am going to deal with in my talk, or her last collection so far *Feminine Gospels* (2002), which, as has been said, should not be misread merely as "feminist gospels" (Woods 2003:185).

⁹ Duffy was once acknowledged, together with other New Generation Poets, as "... true fruits of Post-modernism..." (Forbes 1994:5).

¹⁰ This Duffyan proclivity is also highlighted by Siân Hughes with regard to Duffy's *Feminine Gospels* (2002): "...after a page or ten my brain slips ineluctably over into novel-reader mode;..." (*Poetry Review*, 2002:91) or Michael Woods: "...The latter and newest collection (FG) is striking in its pervasive use of the third person ..." (Michelis & Rowland 2003:184).

2. MIXING GENDERS

The versatility of Duffy's favourite poetic forms, the Dramatic and Interior Monologues, befits the lack of *formal* restraint that defines another no less miscellaneous generic manifestation: "verse satire", by the way, also acknowledged as a favourite form in postmodernist poetry (Dowson 1997: 248),¹¹ and a form consummately practised by Duffy especially, in my view, in her above-mentioned first collection of poetry (*W'sW*), although, as has been said, both volumes "... are high points of satire in Duffy's oeuvre..." (Michelis & Rowland 2003:5).

As regards the second aspect present in my title: "mixing genders", the latter appears connected with the matter of *satire*, i.e. with the two central tenets of the satiric universe: "... the exposure of folly and the castigation of vice..." (Pollard 1980:4) which have basically to do with *gender politics* in most of Duffy's *W's W* poems.

As we all know, this topic seems to be, at the same time, an everlasting and singularly present-day *social* problem, and, in this respect, Duffy's poems converge with one of the requisites specific to English satire in its heyday: the Restoration and Augustan periods (Parfitt 1985:10-11), when the poet was considered a full member of the body social whose harmony he advocates and defends with the sole weapons of his pen and poems. The latter become both mechanisms to expose abuse and vehicles of authorial rebellion.

In our days women have become increasingly acclaimed as poets and, more often than not, they are split or torn between their personal identity and their artistic bent, and the split has become an insistent subject of their poetry. This dilemma has often led them to oppose masculinist stances by means of evoking "... a subtle dialogue of genders which ... has explored the boundaries of the masculine and the feminine..." (Gregson 1996:6-7). In our days, our body social has grown very sensitive to *gender* matters, consequently the way is paved for women's voices to respond to social demand.

In this respect, Avril Horner, who has very recently approached Duffy's poetry from a socio-philosophical perspective, argues that Carol Ann Duffy "...can justifiably be described as a feminist postmodernist writer..." in that she challenges the tradition of western philosophy (Aristotelian) in order to "... show how it underpins particular forms of patriarchy and, as a consequence,

¹¹ Also put forward by Forbes in relation to New Gen Poets: "...Many poets today have thrown off the rather dour, cautious English empiricist mode in favour of a more Latin, carnivalesque way of seeing the world..." (*Poetry Review* 2001:3).

how both sexes have been damaged by it in different ways..." (Michelis & Rowland 2003:99).

As regards *The World's Wife*, Horner considers the book as an exhibition of Duffy's "feminist credentials" in that the feminine voice is that of the "anonymised wife" who "...with wit and irreverence.... thinks back through our mothers..." (105).

In my view, Duffy does so by means of eventually transforming her dramatic monologue into a kind of *satiric* mode which suits perfectly well her authorial displeasure with, say, the overriding "husband's world."

Very briefly, let me remind you of satire's generic nature which is essentially complex with a fundamental role for the *satiric voice*, and two well-defined sides: an individual one, prone to personal or institutional attack, vindictive and occasional; and a universally-oriented side, didactic and morally committed. The first side undermines reputations and humiliates the satiric object either by making a fool of him or out of sheer contempt; the second, also by similar means (parody or severe criticism) condemns, often ironically, everything which infringes the moral, natural or social laws.

That is, the satirist is, above all, a dissatisfied voice, an indignant voice, and, at bottom, he or she is also an idealist, firmly convinced of the possibility of human moral and social regeneration, and, accordingly, eventually sensitive to another of satire's specific features: that of *humanitas* (Bloom 1979:25-26), that essential kind of general empathy with the world and, despite everything, its inhabitants.¹²

Some other of satire's defining features as a fictional product are thematic, and structural. In the first case, satire has mainly to do with man's controversial and conflicting nature, both individual and social, a fact that generates a plurality of satiric subjects (Pollard 1980:6ff). In the second, satire makes ample use of two structural resources: "point of view" and "situational context" (Bloom 1979:22). The satiric point of view may involve two perspectives: "authorial voice" and "multiple point of view." In the first (authorial), more often than not, the satiric voice appears extremely angry, given to insult and sarcasm; or else it may adopt a sort of masque by means of which he or she *pretends* to defend the very vices or follies he or she is indeed condemning. The situational context in its turn points to the different *topoi* chosen by the author and their various positive or negative implications.

¹² "...Steele (*Tatler*, N° 242) argues the need for good nature as an "essential quality in a satirist", because "the ordinary subjects for satire are such as incite the greatest indignation in the best tempers..." (Pollard 1980:74).

Now, let us consider Duffy's *World's Wife* poems as both postmodern generic hybrid products and as no less postmodern satiric discourses.

3. THE BOOK: THE WORLD'S WIFE (1999)

Duffy's volume, *The World's Wife* (Picador, 1999), contains 30, basically dramatic monologues (i.e. with lyric and dramatic components) which, as Duffy herself admits, are put together in order to "carry a narrative", and which show a strong *satiric* bent towards *gender politics*, as has been mentioned.

The 30 poems are spoken by a sort of suffering and avenging, and ultimately compassionate, "archwife" split up into 30 anonymous women most of them married to, let us say, a masculine "hall of fame", both historical and legendary, as stated in the titles themselves: "Mrs Midas", "Mrs Tiresias", "Pilate's Wife", Mrs Aesop", Mrs Darwin", "Mrs Faust", "Frau Freud" etc. These anonymous characters fall invariably victims (and are often avengers) to their famous and powerful husbands, and some of them remind one of the "Wife of Bath", with their witty irreverence for masculinity, whilst others are definitely serious, even somber, indignant and fed up with the masculine universe.

Now, as generic *hybrid* products, these poems combine the generic universals by means of showing the following aspects:

- a) an ability to *suggest* an impression of "lived experience" (Hamburger 1986: 249-50) as well as of "representing vision" (Hernadi 1978:130) which would point to the *lyric* genre;
- b) an ability to "imagine action" (130), i.e. to *tell* a story and its aftermath, which in its turn would approach the *narrative* genre;
- c) an ability to "represent action" (130) i.e. to use *scenic* and *dialogical* means which bring the poem/s closer to the *dramatic* genre.

On the other hand, as *satiric* discourses, most of Duffy's poems in the volume offer a unity of theme which, as mentioned above, largely focuses on *gender politics*, more specifically on two sides of the topic:

- a) battle of sexes;
- b) gender violence, either physical, psychological, or social.

Keeping all this in mind, and as regards the poems themselves, I am going to consider some of the poems from the two perspectives mentioned: *generic* and *satiric*. More precisely, I have selected three poems as specially meaningful in this respect. They are, respectively, two Dramatic and Interior Monologues, and one Indirect Interior Monologue, and range from the gruesome (“Little Red-Cap”), through the ludicrous (“Mrs Midas”) and the ironical, no-less-bitter complaint (“Anne Hathaway”).

4. THE POEMS: GENERIC AND SATIRIC APPROACHES

In the best postmodern tradition,¹³ the first poem in the collection, “Little Red-Cap”, is a consciously bitter *parody* of the traditional story of “Little Red Riding Hood” which is approached in the best feminist revisionist tradition, in which, as has been said, “...the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends (.....)..... the old stories are changed, changed utterly, by female knowledge of female experience, so that they can no longer stand as foundations of collective male fantasy. Instead they are representations of what women find divine and demonic in themselves..... retrieved images of what women have ... historically suffered; in some cases they are instructions for survival” (Ostriker 1986:315-316).

Parody, as we all know, has often been highlighted as a *transgeneric* fact,¹⁴ able to contaminate the other three natural genres, and, consequently, it becomes a relevant factor in the postmodern process of generic hybridization which, as I have said early in this exposé, pervades Duffy’s proclivity to monologue.

“Little Red-Cap” shows a clear combination of Interior (narrative-lyric) and Dramatic (dramatic-lyric) Monologues, in that the poem develops by both “imagining action” and “representing action.” In the first case, there are authorial 3rd person pronouns(he), and 1st person internal focalization (verbs of perception); in the second, we have the presence of a 2nd person as silent auditor (*YOU might ask why...l. 13*), who triggers the speaker’s self-revelation, as well as both scenic and dialogic situations. Of course, we must not forget that the

¹³ “... We live in a world in which simulation is all important – in which real objects are replaced by their copies and in which culture has to be seen as an assemblage of texts, all of which are intertextually related to one another and gain their meaning from their connection to other texts that preceded them...” (Cashmore & Rojek 1999:6-7).

¹⁴ Ferreira-Duarte 1999:75; Nünning 1999:131.

above-stated double nature of the poem (Interior and Dramatic Monologue) implies also a strong underlying *lyrical* bent, as we shall see.

In the poem the *narrative* quality of the preceding tale becomes dominant since the title itself, which so becomes a clear generic signal. This has the momentary effect of somewhat overshadowing the dramatic component in order to unfold the story of a present-day, teenage “little red riding hood” (*At childhood’s end...l.1*), who undergoes rude seduction by a wolfish male poet, through a series of retrospective episodes told from the perspective of the main character’s adult voice (*But then I was young... l. 31*)

By means of a narrative technique which combines, as I have said, narration (3rd person) and focalization (1st person); these episodes tell us about the girl’s first meeting the “big bad wolf” (*It was there that I first clapped my eyes on the wolf... l. 6*), the latter’s description and her “lolita” impulse to please him (ll.11-12), the latter’s both evil and attractive (poet’s) nature (stanzas 3,4,5), and the unavoidably violent outcome when after 10 years (l.31) the once seduced girl takes revenge (stanzas 6, 7) and recovers her self-esteem and freedom (*Out of the forest I come with my flowers, singing, all alone. l. 42*), giving a strongly ironical turn to the original children’s tale.

Yet, despite the strong narrative flavour, the poem also brims with *dramatic* effects, both scenic and dialogic, a quality which has been highly praised in New Gen Poets like Duffy (Faherty 1997:277).

In respect to the first (scenic), the poem carefully reveals several scenic situations which frame the story:

- a) the landscape (houses, factory, railway line, caravan, woods, St. 1),
- b) the setting (wood’s clearing, wolf’s lair, St. 2-4)
- c) the main character’s actions (seductress, St.2; sleeping with the wolf, St. 3,4; reading poetry, St.5; killing the wolf, going away, St.7)
- d) the supporting character’s actions (reading poetry,St.2; beastly behaviour, St. 3, 4).

As regards conversational interaction, this is mainly an internal dialogue which takes place in the speaker’s mind, firstly between the poem’s speaker (the woman’s adult voice) and the above-mentioned silent auditor (YOU, l. 13); and secondly, between the girl and the werewolf (l.26). The first-mentioned speech acts are expressed in Free Direct Thought without either inverted commas or reporting clause (ll. 9-10; 22), whilst the second one is expressed in Direct Thought (*How nice, breakfast in bed, he said l.26*).

Beside these evident and striking narrative and dramatic components, the poem "Little Red-Cap" also offers *lyric* traits, i.e. in Hamburger's terms, it gives a strong impression of "lived experience"¹⁵ and it does so by using a unique lyric subject who mainly speaks (or rather *thinks*) in the 1st person singular, as well as by means of poetic foregrounding both formal and figurative.

With regard to formal foregrounding, and as is the case in Duffy, the poet aspires to give an appearance of formal regularity to her poem.

"Little Red-Cap" is a somewhat longish poem in free-verse (a sequel of its narrative origins) patterned in 7 verse-groups (or pseudo-stanzas) of 6-line, mostly 5-stressed, verses. Very occasionally one can find throughout the poem cases of *imperfect end-rhyme* (woods/wolf, 5/6; place/blazer, 15/17; wolf/dove, 22/24; head/blood, 29/30; salmon/bones, 37/40), whilst the poem is strikingly rich in *internal rhyme* which reinforces the impression of cohesion: i.e. clearing/reading (l.7); paw/jaw (ll. 8/9); sixteen/been (l.12); shreds/red (l.17); clues/shoes (l. 18); lair/beware (l.19); dead/bed/said (l. 26); slept/crept (l. 27); frantic/music (l. 30); season/reason (l. 36); wept/leapt/slept (ll. 37/38/39); bones/stones (ll. 40/41).

Another remarkable lyrical trait in the poem has to do with the phonological level. In this respect, "Little Red-Cap" is brimming with *alliteration*, within the same line or in contiguous lines: fields/factory (l.2); mistresses/married men (l.3); paperback/paw (l.8); bearded/big (l. 9); sweet/sixteen/been/babe/bought (l. 12); wolf/woods (l. 14); stockings/scraps/ripped/red (l.17); shreads/shoes (l. 17/18); branch/better/beware/breath (ll. 18/19/20); buried/birds (l. 33); rhyme/reason (l. 36); willow/wept/see/salmon (l. 37); slept/scrotum/saw (l. 39); bones/belly (ll. 40/41); filled/forest/flowers (l. 42) etc.

In addition, it is worth remarking on the *vowel harmony* or modulation present in lines 35: "... howls the same old song at the moon year in year out...", and 36: "... season after season, same rhyme same reason...."

On the other hand, to deal with the above-mentioned figurative foregrounding I move to the semantic level, and, in this context, "Little Red-Cap" also "represents vision" as befits the *lyric*. That is, the poem reveals an underlying view which transcends the surface or immediate gender violence and ultimately points to a wish for woman's liberation, most evident in the ironical

¹⁵ For Käte Hamburger the lyric subject is "real" in contradistinction to the fictitiousness inherent in narrative and dramatic subjects. It is a "real" subject, not on biographical premises, but in so far as it has the capacity of endowing the ever fictive experience in the poem with an impression of "lived" experience (1986:249-250).

last line: “Out of the forest I come with my flowers, singing, all alone” (l.42). This topic will be taken up later in this exposé.

The matter of “representing vision” also concerns the *satiric* side of the poem, i.e. it is also discernible both in the bitterly *parodic* element and its *iconic* or tropological dimension. As we all know, parody ridicules a well-known text and, consequently, “Little Red-Cap” becomes a revisionist conceptualisation of the original “Little Red Riding Hood”, with the main character as a symbol for a sort of an updated “lolita” who starts by seducing the beastly male figure, and ends by taking revenge on him for the sake of herself and her grandmother’s (l.40).

This parodic re-conceptualisation of the female character involves the matter of postmodern characterization which unfolds by challenging the idea of selfhood or identity. That is the character differs from other characters, but, above all, from his or her own supposed self (Day & Docherty 1997: 140), i.e. “Little Red-Cap” is NOT indeed a “Little Red Riding Hood”....

In addition, we have the no less satiric transmutation of the original greedy wolf into a coarse symbol of a wolfish womanizer whose sheep’s clothing are, most paradoxically, those of a poet (ll. 7-8, 13, 28-30, 35-36).

Both key-figures ultimately point to a painful satirization of the male-female relationship in terms of both physical and psychological gender violence.

Two other relevant structural aspects of satire are, as stated before:

- (a) “point of view” (which includes the “authorial” and “multiple” perspectives);
- (b) “situational context”

The matter of “point of view” in “Little Red-Cap” is clearly one of “authorial voice” behind an objective correlative which is Little Red-Cap herself who becomes the satiric subject, and as such her utterance becomes increasingly aggressive with respect to the satiric object, the “werewolf.” From the poem’s start, she describes him by means of highlighting his beastly features (wolfy drawl; hairy paw; What teeth!, ll. 8, 10), and goes on enhancing them: “...I clung till dawn to his thrashing fur...” (l. 21); “... I slid from between his heavy matted paws...” (l. 23); “... breakfast in bed... he said / licking his chops...” (ll. 26-27), until she hurls the worst insult for a poet/womaniser: that which puts special emphasis on age: “... a greying wolf / howls the same old song at the moon, year in, year out, / season after season, same rhyme, same reason.../” (ll. 34-36).

At the same time, the satiric subject shows some ghoulish attraction for the satiric object "... What little girl doesn't dearly love a wolf?..." (l.22), a fact that implies a certain perversion of another specific trait of satire: that of *humanitas* or empathetic feeling for the satirized object.

In addition, this variety of hidden "authorial" utterance offers, as a consequence, also a *tonal* variety which alternates irony, sarcasm and cynicism with touches of rage, tenderness and hope

As regards the "situational context" in "Little Red-Cap", it has negative implications throughout the poem inasmuch as it invariably refers either to solitary "woods" (ll. 5,14-16) or, above all, to the wolf's "lair" ("... better beware..." l. 19) paradoxically full of books and blood (ll. 28-30).

As regards the second poem, "Mrs. Midas", it has been considered by the Selectors of the *PBS Bulletin* (Maura Dooley and Jamie MacKendrick) as the one which by itself justifies our reading *The World's Wife*: "... It is a book full of details yet worth reading for one poem, 'Mrs Midas', alone..." (6). This is, in my view, an excessively generous judgement, although, the poem, undoubtedly, deserves our attention.

"Mrs Midas" is, technically speaking, very similar to "Little Red-Cap" with 11 verse-groups of six line free-verses (or, again, pseudo-stanzas) rich in alliteration, and two relevant differences:

- a) the *dramatic*-generic component is emphasized, at the expense of the *narrative* one;
- b) the *satiric* dimension is somewhat, say, softened, less gruesome, in that the gender violence matter rather keeps to the psychological.

Again the poem fuses Dramatic and Interior Monologue and *parody* comes to the forefront, now of a more bitter-sweet kind which pervades both the dramatic and the narrative domains.

The latter (*narrative*) is part of the Interior Monologue and becomes a sort of general frame for the whole story. The frame is based on an updated revisionist (Ostriker 1986:315-16) parodization of the myth/legend of the paradoxically "poor" King Midas and the Golden Touch (the latter being a gift which he, ultimately, has to plead to be delivered from) who was punished by Apollo to grow a pair of ass-ears.

Also, the allusion to King Midas's story leads us to "The Wife of Bath's Tale", where Midas's queen (or wife) appears as the only person to know of his mishap ("... Save for his wife, there was not one that knew...": l. 302) and as a misogynist representation of woman's incapacity to keep a secret (l. 303).

In the process of parodization, the poem presents us with a “dethroned” Midas and his wife no longer “queen” but “Mrs” (Midas), i.e. both characters are, as befits satire, conveniently degraded and updated into ordinary lower-middle-class people with the wife in the kitchen resigned to “cooking vegetables” (l.2) and the husband permanently wishing for, say, economic or material improvement at all costs (“... the fool / who wished for gold...” l. 53).

Again, as is the case in “Little Red-Cap”, the narrative quality becomes evident from the generic signal that is the poem’s title (“Mrs Midas”), and goes on combining authorial 3rd person narration and 1st person internal focalization in a lengthy exposition of the couple’s fortunes and their sad outcome, given the strong disparity of their aims and hopes evident in the last “stanza” (st. 11).

But, as I have said above, “M’s M” differs from “Little Red-Cap” because it is the *dramatic* element which becomes dominant in the poem, and, consequently, its DM quality is enhanced. In “Mrs Midas” we have the essential presence of the silent auditor (WE/YOU: ll. 32, 39, 55) and both characters are permanently in full activity, each of them involved in their own circumstances. In this respect, let us observe them:

1. The wife:

- involved in domestic chores (st. 1, 4)
- keeping her distance from her greedy husband (st. 5, 7, 9)

2. The husband:

- putting into practice his “golden touch” throughout the poem, tragically unaware of its consequences.

With regard to the conversational aspect in the DM, “Mrs Midas” offers several dialogical situations both in Direct (ll. 17, 36) and Free Direct Speech and Thought (ll. 32, 43-44) which involve husband and wife, and wife with the silent auditor.

Now, before putting an end to the *generic* consideration, let me remind you of the *lyrical* element present as much in Dramatic as in Interior Monologue. In this respect, “Mrs Midas” (like “LR-Cap”) both “represents vision” and gives an impression of “lived reality”, as we shall see.

The representation of vision in the poem also becomes evident at the semantic level, with, above all, the, at the same time, powerful and destructive symbol of “gold”: “... Do you know about gold? / It feeds no one.... Slakes/ no thirst...” (l. 32), “... And who can live with a heart of gold?...” (ll. 43-44), triggering off the couple’s misfortune: “... Separate beds. In fact, I put a chair against my door / near petrified...” (ll. 37-38), and its aftermath, expressed by

the perceptive wife: "... What gets me now is not the idiocy or greed / but lack of thought for me. Pure selfishness..." (l. 61).

As regards the *satiric* consideration of the poem, "Mrs Midas" (like "LR-Cap") is a case of individual satire which *ridicules* the satiric *object* ("Mr" Midas) because of his obsessive and indiscriminate use of his "golden touch", as in the following verse reminiscent of Eliot's (*W. Land*): "... he sat in that chair like a king on a burnished throne..." (l. 16); or in his wife's terror to be touched by him "... I Made him sit / on the other side of the room and keep his hands to himself / I locked the cat in the cellar. I moved the phone / The toilet I didn't mind ..." (ll. 27-30).

Besides, it is a satire which also *humiliates* the above-mentioned satiric object for his greed and egocentricity (st. 9, 11). To do so, the satiric *subject* (Mrs Midas) recurs to direct insult, as befits authorial "point of view": "fool" (l.52), or she refers to "idiocy" and "selfishness" in the last "stanza" (ll.61-62). Meanwhile the wife has made evident the psychological violence which pervades the poem: her "shaking hand" when pouring the wine (l.22), her "scream" (l.25) and fear when she realised his husband's terrible gift (ll.41-42): "... Now I feared his honeyed embrace / the kiss that would turn my lips to a work of art..." (st. 7) as well as her difficult situation: "... then I came home, the woman who married the fool / who wished for gold..." (ll. 52-53).

As to the "situational context" in the poem, it is both domestic ("kitchen", "bedroom"), and natural ("garden"), the latter paradoxically and satirically degraded into hardened gold, and becoming progressively hostile to human taste. There is also another negative context in the "... caravan in the wilds, in a glade of its own..." (ll.49-50) which eventually becomes the satiric object's "home", a remote place, distant from any possibility of human relation.

Yet, Mrs Midas has a heart in its right place and, occasionally, satiric good nature and empathy tinges the poem. Despite everything, ironically, she enjoys the possibility of her husband's giving up smoking ("... for good..." l.36); she also evokes their happy days of marriage (ll.39-41), her visits to him when the latter was isolated in the caravan (l.53-54), and, above all, she admits her "thinking of him" and her "missing" him most, especially (and ironically): "...his hands, his warm hands... his touch" (ll.64-66).... Which does not seem to be precisely his "golden touch."

The third poem in question here, "Anne Hathaway" (AH), is a totally different kind of composition, yet without giving up either generic hybridity or satiric stamp.

From a *generic* point of view, I have chosen "AH" as an extreme case of generic manipulation transferred to a poetic product so unequivocally *lyric* as is

the sonnet. This can be clearly seen by making a short description of its generic constituents, which, as in “Little Red-Cap” and “Mrs Midas”, most artistically combine also in “AH.”

The *narrative* constituents are evident from the poem’s subtitle: (*Item I gyve unto my wief my second best bed*) (from Shakespeare’s will), which refers to the Shakespearian testamentary anecdote according to which the best playwright of all times leaves as his only legacy to his wife (AH) his “second best bed.” This fact is positively interpreted by Gareth and Barbara Lloyd-Evans in 1978 (: 25-26) as something conventional in Shakespeare’s day, yet rather less positively by Duffy in 1999, as we shall see.

Other narrative constituents in the poem are:

- the presence of a narrating voice in the 3rd (he, it, his, they) and 1st persons (I, we);
- the haunting underlying existence of a marital love-story played out on that “second best bed”;
- the presence of a feminine historical character (AH), both figural narrator and lyric subject, as will be seen, who offers some degree of characterization: (a) she is competent in literary matters (ll. 1-3), and in poetical matters in particular (ll.3-7); (b) She is endowed with an intelligent and subtle irony (the subversive factor in gendered poetry) by means of which she claims to keep the memory of her “playful” husband (l.12: “...my living laughing love...”) in her small feminine head (l.13: “...I hold him in the casket of my widow’s head...”) also understood as a secondary place (l. 14: “... As he held me upon that next best bed...”).

In addition, the poem also offers some *dramatic* element, less abundant than the narrative ones but no less evident. We have for instance the allusion (genre marker) which constitutes the poem’s title and refers to the wife of that epitome of dramatists: William Shakespeare, whose works are “pearls” (l.3), and which are repeatedly evoked in the general *scenic* frame represented by the marriage-bed (l.1: “The bed we loved in...”), which is the “second/next best bed”, because the best was reserved for guests (l.11).

However, the poem’s *lyric* dimension is definitely prominent and the *lyric* constituents are the most abundant, ostensible, and beautiful.

Again, the poem’s title (AH) becomes a generic signal as it refers not only to AH as the wife of SH the playwright, but, above all, of SH the *poet*, a condition largely acknowledged throughout the poem (ll. 3-7; 11-12).

Other substantial lyric constituents are:

1. the presence of a unique lyric subject who speaks, or, rather focalizes, in the 3rd person, and, less frequently, in the 1st one (singular and plural). This subject enlarges on “her poetic reality” chronologically set in the Shakespearian past and spatially in the vivid evocation of the marital bed. As a consequence, the poem is an evocation of the marital relationship from the wife’s perspective and becomes a sort of Indirect Interior Monologue which shows an authorial presence by the use of the 3rd person, but the syntax and focalization is that of character (Wales 1990: 255).
2. the apparently occasional nature of a poem whose aim is not to inform us about testamentary regulations, but to express the lyric subject interiorisation of the narrated events.
3. the poem’s no less apparently strict poetic *form*. We are, most conveniently, looking at a manipulated Shakespearian sonnet, which offers a rhyme-scheme “orthodoxically” indistinct, i.e., the latter can only be discerned in the first quartet (a b a b) and the final couplet (c c), whilst the two central stanzas practically remain loose. As regards metre, the dominant iambic pentameter form is conventionally, even forcibly kept (1.7)
4. finally, the poem’s *lyric* nature reveals itself as “representing vision”, both in figurative aspects (sense imagery, metaphor) and in the final couplet. In the first case we come across different sensory images (bed = spinning world (1), words = shooting stars = kisses (2-3), body = softer rhyme = echo = assonance (5-6), touch = verb dancing (6-7); as well as a central image which creates the analogy BED = PAGE (7-8), a metaphorical simile whose tenor or target is the *marital love-writing (poetry)*¹⁶ –*relationship*, where the feminine lyric subject becomes part of the “page” in the powerful author’s hands.

Yet, this lyric vision, apparently romantic and submissive, should not lead us to forget “another vision” present in the poem, the more realistic and subversively *ironic* one which results from the above-mentioned *narrative* constituents. The latter appears in the final couplet (13-14), with the wife keeping in her small “widow’s head”, instead of in her loving heart, the memory of a possibly unfaithful husband.

This other ironic vision almost naturally overlaps with the *satiric* side in “AH”, and, in this respect, the poem offers a, say, more relaxed and much more

¹⁶ Because, as we have seen, in the other bed, the “best”, only *prose* can be written (l. 12).

subtle kind of gendered satire than that offered by either “LR-Cap” and “Mrs Midas.”

To start with, “AH” is not a personal satire aimed at exposing or even debunking a male figure, but rather a *social* satire aimed at ridiculing marital domestic uses of the day, such as hosting and testamentary habits (both of which push into the background the wife figure), and, by so doing, the satiric process implicates both marriage as institution and the husband figure.

Consequently, we do not have here a legendary feminine character (as LRC or MM) as satiric voice, but a no less anonymous yet historical one: AH who turns to *irony* as her weapon against gendered *social* violence on women/wives. As a result her behaviour radically differs from that of the women considered in the other two poems: AH is much more clever and subtle, she does not openly insult or attack her satiric object/s, rather she even pretends to *defend* the very outrages she is indeed condemning by turning to irony.

As a result, she is able to evoke her husband’s more than supposed infidelity, as neglected wife in Stratford,¹⁷ by referring to him as her “...living laughing love...” (12), and, above all, she is able to pay him back in kind, i.e. she also pushes him into the background: first by using her maiden’s name (AH, not Mrs SH), secondly, by holding his memory in her small (and usually considered inferior) feminine brain¹⁸ (... casket of my widow’s head... 13) as he kept her for his “second/next best bed” (14).

However, like our previous wife (MM), the lucid AH cannot avoid empathizing with the target of her irony. She devotes most of the poem to telling us about her deep admiration for her husband’s work (ll.1-4), as well as to evoking their love for each other (ll. 3-10) in the “second best bed” (l.1) a love expressed in highly sensory verse: “... my body now a softer rhyme / to his, now echo, assonance; ... Romance / and drama played by touch, by scent, by taste...” (ll. 5-6; 9-10), whilst in “the other bed”, the best and first, only “prose” could be written (ll. 11-12). This admiration and love are summed up at an intertextual level, with the first line in the poem: “The bed we loved in...” clearly evoking SH’s *Antony and Cleopatra* (“... The barge she sat in” II.ii.195). This analogy allows Duffy both to refer to SH’s haunting but unvoiced presence in the poem, and to establish a comparison between the two couples: the real (SH and Anne H) and the dramatic (Antony & Cleopatra).

¹⁷ Let us evoke here Shakespeare’s marriage-story, with the neglected wife in Stratford whilst the husband remained in London, as well as the figure of Anne Hathaway as the “second Anne” in SH’s life. The “first” could be one Anne Whateley. See Lloyd-Evans 1987:4, 23.

¹⁸ See Duffy’s “Small Female Skull” (*Mean Time* 1993:25).

Besides the powerful final analogy: CASKET = HEAD also may have some positive implications: according to the OED, a “casket” is often made of precious material and workmanship, a fact which, figuratively, would compensate for the above-mentioned widow’s small head/brain; and also, a “casket” holds or keeps jewelry, which, in its turn, would sublimate the husband’s memory (l.13).

Finally, the *situational context* in “AH” restricts itself to the private domain. The poem is NOT a DM and, consequently, the lyric/satiric subject has no “silent auditor” to receive her complaints and confidences. The setting evoked, as I have said before, is the bedroom with the marriage-bed as relevant focus of attention in the poem, hence the very subtitle.

5. UNITY IN THE WORLD’S WIFE

First and foremost, this unity is acknowledged by Duffy herself: “... I’ve ordered the poems so that together they carry a narrative...” (1999:5) i.e. Duffy’s collection is, as she says, a narrative, and, I may add, it is made up of a series of *lyrical* episodes which are the individual poems. The latter are spoken by unique lyrical subjects who express themselves mainly in the first person singular, and who are “real” subjects in Hamburger’s terms (see note 22) “... not on biographical premises” but in their capacity “of endowing the ever fictive experience in the poem with an impression of “lived” experience...” (1986:249-250), a fact, which is not alien, in my view, to Duffy’s *naturalistic* technique of characterization, as mentioned early in this exposé.

That is, the high degree of genre hybridization helps us to perceive that the poems are, ultimately, not meant to tell or dramatise different stories, but to reveal the different subjects’ *interiorisation* of such stories, which, by the way, also offer a considerable degree of *thematic unity* focused on, as we know, gender politics.

The process of interiorisation is made from *satiric/parodic* (and ironic) perspectives, which provide us, by inference, “... with the value judgment of the author...” (Levin 1976:47), and again the wheel goes full circle: in this respect Duffy admits biographical intimations: the “narrative” which she refers to, turns up to be, as she says: “... the emotional, *imaginary biography*, sometimes political, or erotic, or comic, of a woman and poet ...” (1999 *PBS*: 5. My emphasis), a fact that again attests to the strong impression of *unity* provided by the collection in question.

In my view, both unity and biography become most evident, on the one hand, if we remember the above-mentioned “vision” in the first poem considered (Little Red-Cap); and, on the other, in the lyrical and hopeful poetic *epilogue* which closes the book.

As we know now, the ultimate “vision” in “Little Red-Cap” (the first poem in the collection) points to wistful intimations of women’s liberation (l. 42). Well then, this desire seems to come hopefully true in the volume’s *last* poem entitled “Demeter.” This title refers to the Greek goddess of agriculture and fertility, including human fertility, and also most famed for her motherly role. Duffy’s last poem (again an experimental sonnet) echoes Demeter’s story with the abduction of her daughter Persephone and its consequences: the earth’s sterility until the daughter is restored to her mother and Nature blossoms again.

The process is lyrically reproduced by Duffy with the first part of the poem (ll.1-6) devoted to evoking natural and poetic sterility: “... Where I lived – winter and hard earth. / I sat in my cold stone room / choosing tough words, granite, flint / to break the ice...”, and the second part (ll.7-14) devoted to neutralising the former effect by means of a hopefully maternal image of recovery, as much of the author’s poetic strength, as of new and more free ways of living the feminine identity:

.... She came from a long, long way
 but I saw her at last, walking
 my daughter, my girl, across the fields,

 in bare feet, *bringing all spring’s flowers*
to her mother’s house. I swear
the air softened and warmed as she moved,

 the blue sky smiling, none too soon, (a)
 with the small shy mouth of *a new moon.* (a) (ll. 7-14)

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