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## **Carol Ann Duffy's Dramatic Monologues: Lyric Otherness, Ethical Distance, and Political Subjectivization**

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**RÉSUMÉ.** Poétesse Lauréate du Royaume-Uni, Carol Ann Duffy s'inscrit dans une tradition littéraire marquée par le féminisme, qui tente de faire entendre les voix et les récits de celles dont l'histoire n'a pas conservé la trace. Cet article étudie plusieurs de ses monologues dramatiques pour tenter de montrer que, bien qu'elle reste fidèle à un emploi pré-moderniste de cette forme, les voix qu'elle construit ne sont pas véritablement monologiques. Malgré leur apparente unité, ces poèmes incluent souvent une présence lyrique seconde qui remet en question l'identité du discours fictionnel. En me référant au concept de processus de subjectivisation forgé par Jacques Rancière, j'essaie de montrer que Duffy ne donne pas, à proprement parler, une voix à ses personnages, mais bien qu'elle crée un espace entre-deux où interagissent voix fictionnelle et présence lyrique. Ainsi, elle refuse de parler pour, mais choisit de parler avec. En cela, ses poèmes proposent une posture éthique qui tente de rester fidèle à un des éléments fondamentaux du féminisme de la troisième vague. Certains monologues exploitent par ailleurs leur relation à d'autres média (peinture, œuvres d'art, lectures publiques), et ce faisant pluralisent encore davantage les voix qui habitent ces poèmes. Ses monologues dramatiques produisent dès lors la possibilité d'une communauté d'expérience. Enfin, l'article suggère que le politique ne se situe pas seulement dans la création d'une satire d'inspiration féministe, mais qu'il faut avant tout le chercher dans l'exploration des possibilités de la voix poétique au sein du monologue dramatique, puisqu'elle introduit un dissensus au sein-même de la notion d'identité, ouvrant ainsi un espace de subjectivisation politique au sein du poétique.

**ABSTRACT.** *British Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy is part of a tradition of feminist writers setting out to make readers bear the unheard stories and voices of unknown historical female figures. This article examines some of Duffy's dramatic monologues and attempts to show that the voices constructed in the poems are not plainly monologic, often including as they do a secondary lyric presence questioning the identity constructed by the fictional speech. Using Rancière's concept of a process of subjectivization, I try to show that Duffy creates an in-between space for a fictional voice and a lyric presence to interact. Rather than speaking for she speaks with, thereby trying to remain ethically faithful to a premise of third-wave feminism. Some of her monologues also exploit their relationship with off-the-page media, further pluralizing the poems' voices. Her dramatic monologues therefore open the possibility of a community of experience. The article finally suggests that the political in these monologues does not only lie in their satirical and feminist content but in the fact that Duffy's exploration of the possibilities of poetic voice within the dramatic monologue allows for a dissent from the very notion of identity while providing a poetic space for political subjectivization.*

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**MOTS-CLÉS :** Carol Ann Duffy, monologue dramatique, subjectivation politique, identité, voix fictionnelle, voix lyrique, performance

**KEYWORDS:** *Carol Ann Duffy, dramatic monologue, political subjectivization, identity, fictional voice, lyric voice, performance*

One major trend of contemporary British poetry since the 1980s has consisted in giving a voice to the absent speakers of history, in echoing the unheard words and stories of the outcast and those left behind by society. The work of English Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy was seminal to that movement. Among many different personae, her early poems presented the voices of an unknown model posing for a painter, a nineteenth century maid in love with her mistress, or even a psychopath reminiscing about his latest crime. Her recreation of those anonymous figures found its ideal poetic echo chamber in the renewal of the Victorian dramatic monologue. In doing so, she built her reputation as a leading figure of contemporary British poetry now widely read and taught in the UK.

Duffy was central to a new movement of British poetry largely influenced by Northern Irish poets from the so-called Belfast Group, which included, among many others, Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldoon as well as Michael and Edna Longley. The political context of Northern Ireland was essential to the writers who belonged to the group and led them to question, each in their own way, notions of Britishness and identity in general. That is one reason why they were so influential for a whole generation of non-central British poets—Scottish, Welsh poets, but also poets from the North of England, or second-generation immigrants from Jamaica or Nigeria. As a gay Scottish woman raised near Sheffield, who studied in Liverpool, Duffy was perhaps bound to be attracted to the questioning of identity that gave such vitality to Northern Irish poetry in the 1960s and 1970s.

Yet, with the dramatic monologue she chose a poetic medium that displaced the focus from her own marginal identity to unheard or un-hearable voices. The polemical gesture they constituted was obvious, as they departed from the Victorian model of the historical monologue embodied by Robert Browning's famous work *The Ring and the Book*. Their preoccupation with the modern world and their political content contrasted quite starkly with Browning's verse fiction about a murder trial in XVII<sup>th</sup> century Rome. But Duffy actually tapped into an existing tradition<sup>1</sup> of social and polemical monologues written by women writers from as early as the first half of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century. However, contrary to less famous predecessors such as Felicia Hemans or Augusta Webster, her early dramatic monologues have become modern classics in the United Kingdom. Duffy's work is now deemed to epitomize a preoccupation with difference and

<sup>1</sup> Which was brought to light by Isobel Armstrong in her landmark study *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (1993).

anonymity associated with the rise of third-wave feminism, the affirmation of minority politics and Britain's progressive self-definition as a nation of diversity. Her early work—contrary to her later more overtly personal collections—is therefore usually believed to be an attempt at giving a voice to the unheard other, while the poet remains a silent presence.

However, I believe that Carol Ann Duffy's use of voice in the monologues is far more complex—my contention in this paper will be that Duffy does not, strictly speaking, *give* a voice to the personae of her poems while remaining a distant underlying presence. Instead, I want to show that her poems are spaces of interaction between a fictional speaker and a lyric presence. Using Jacques Rancière's idea of subjectivization introduced in *On the Shores of Politics*, I shall try to demonstrate that the voices in the monologues represent moments of what Rancière calls "impossible identification". Instead of a plainly monologic fictional recreation of the others through a naturalistic use of voice, these poems are inherently democratic forms where speech integrates and interrogates otherness in an endless mirror effect. In addition, her poems also exploit their relationships with a plurality of media—paintings, artwork, performance—which also question the stability of the text and further question the possibility of identification. In that respect, Duffy's work on poetic voice attempts to walk the ethical tightrope of third wave feminism—creating a space for impossible identification is also in part a response to its potentially contradictory injunctions: refusing to speak for the unheard whilst still making room for their voices. The monologue is therefore an ethical in-between. I believe that it is within that in-between space where identity itself is questioned, that the most fruitful interaction of the poetic and the political is to be found in Carol Ann Duffy's work.

### **Speaking With Against Speaking For: the Ethical Problem of Ventriloquism**

In their introduction to the collective volume on Duffy's poetry *Choosing Tough Words* (2003), Angelica Michelis and Antony Rowland argue that Duffy's work is not merely anchored in an allegiance to a premodernist, i.e. mostly Browningsque, type of monologue. They explain that even though Duffy does not follow Pound or Eliot's deconstruction of the form, "in which often disparate and incoherent voices speak in sometimes obscure locations" (13), many of her dramatic monologues still "parade an awareness of their own artificiality" (13). Even though the influence of Eliot was essential to Duffy's early work and possibly to the development of her interest in the dramatic monologue, she chose to remain faithful to a postmodern tradition of dramatic monologues by feminist writers, in which the unity of the fictional voice was indeed preserved. For Michelis and Rowland this might have to do with "the fact that politics sits uneasily with texts in which voices are blurred to the point at which any viewpoint is interchangeable." (13)

However, while it is certainly the case that the fictional voices constructed in Duffy's monologues are clearly identifiable, the distance regarding those voices

that transpires in the texts is not solely due to an “awareness of their own artificiality”. Indeed, Duffy’s dramatic monologues often coexist with a secondary lyric presence, which I will interpret as being part of a political and ethical gesture. I believe that by preserving a fluctuating zone of interaction between speaker and poetic voice, the poems avoid naturalizing a fixed identity. They remind the reader that if there is such a thing as identity, it will only be approached in poetry through an exploration of the relationship between self and other.

In her authoritative book about the form, Glennis Byron explains that one key element of the dramatic monologue is the implied presence of an auditor. According to her, there are two ways in which that presence is constructed by the poem: a) the auditor can be fictionally present, he/she can exist within the fictional context implied by the monologue, as in Robert Browning’s famous “My Last Duchess”, where the Duke of Ferrara is speaking to an emissary sent to negotiate his marriage. Or b) the auditor can be implied as an external figure—either a figure imagined by the speaker, or, simply, the reader. It is interesting to notice that, contrary to most famous Victorian monologues, Duffy’s never contain a fictional implied auditor within the context of the poems. Duffy almost always chooses the second option—i.e. the auditor implied as a figure external to the world of the poem—, in which the speaker’s voice is presented as less naturalistic and its artificial nature emphasized.

Yet, the most original feature of her poems lies in her use of the lyric element within the context of the dramatic monologues, which preserves a sense of exchange within the speaking ‘I’ instead of a strict, static positioning. Rather than contenting herself with projecting her own fantasies through a consistent mode of characterization, she prefers to open a zone of confrontation and coexistence for two distinct voices.

In “Woman Seated in the Underground, 1941” she gives voice to a character from a drawing by Henry Moore:

Now they are singing. *Underneath the lantern  
by the barrack gate.* But waiting for whom?  
Did I? I have no wedding ring, no handbag, nothing.  
I want a fag. I have either lost my ring or I am  
a loose woman. No. Someone has loved me. Someone  
is looking for me even now. I live somewhere.  
I sing the word *darling* and it yields nothing.

Nothing. A child is crying. Mine doesn’t show yet.  
Baby. My hands mime the memory of knitting.  
Purl. Plain. I know how to do these things, yet my mind  
has unravelled into thin threads that lead nowhere. [...] (Duffy 2015, 50)

Interestingly, the woman is shell-shocked and suffers from an amnesia that we suppose was caused by an explosion during the blitz of London. Her loss of a traditional female identity she underlines by noticing that she has “no wedding

ring, no handbag, nothing.” Yet the assertiveness of her following, blunt declarative statements establishes an unexpected strength of voice. Despite being in a state of shock, she is no shaking woman, her hands are not trembling. Instead, they are knitting. This “unravelling”, anonymous voice, whose remaining attributes (motherhood and knitting) are traditional symbols of femininity, can nonetheless be read as a figure of female autonomy and endurance.

Moreover, her obsession with knitting echoes well-known representations and feminist analyses of female writing, thus suggesting an underlying closeness between speaker and writer. Therefore, the alliterative line “My hands mime the memory of knitting.” can also be construed as a metapoetic muttering. This dramatic monologue takes on a new significance: it is tempting to read the isolation of this seated female subject as an echo of the isolation of a woman writer “who know[s] how to do these things”, how to perform those traditional roles, but has “unravelling” them from their social context through the deconstructive process of self-expression. The voice in this monologue is not exactly monologic for a secondary lyric voice or, at least, a persona closer to the poet, is offered as a simultaneous possibility of reading. I believe that the introduction of that lyric dissonance is a way to undermine the hubris of the gesture of the dramatic monologue: a choice to speak with or together, instead of speaking for. Together with the anonymity of the speaker, this secondary poetic presence invites the readers to question their own assumptions about characterization and voice. Because it introduces a crack in a monologic discourse, the poem leaves space for us to think about what we expect, think we know of, and possibly want to hear from the character that reclaims a voice in the poem. Duffy’s ability to speak with is therefore also a question addressed to an ethically problematic attempt at ventriloquizing the other.

### **Mocking the Mask, Refuting the Fiction: a Space for Political Subjectivization**

Poet and critic Deryn Rees-Jones is probably right in saying that “the dramatic monologue presents a way of bringing the poet’s self into the public world, while simultaneously denying responsibility, and masking presence” (Rees-Jones 17). While taking us away from matters of poetics, it reminds us that satire presents certain risks, and the dramatic monologue might function as a safeguard. It is indeed very tempting to interpret a monologue like “Little Red Cap” in that way:

At childhood’s end, the houses petered out  
 into playing fields, the factory allotments  
 kept, like mistresses, by kneeling married men,  
 the silent railway line, the hermit’s caravan,  
 till you came at last to the edge of the woods.  
 It was there that I first clapped eyes on the wolf.  
 He stood in a clearing, reading his verse out loud  
 in his wolfy drawl, a paperback in his hairy paw,

red wine staining his bearded jaw. What big ears  
 he had! What big eyes he had! What teeth!  
 In the interval, I made quite sure he spotted me,  
 sweet sixteen, never been, babe, waif, and bought me a drink,  
 my first. You might ask why. Here's why. Poetry. (Duffy 1999, 3-4)

This is the opening poem of *The World's Wife*, an entire collection of revisionary monologues where women, real or imaginary, whose voices have never been heard throughout history or in fiction, are allowed to speak. This poem is a tale of poetic as well as sexual liberation, and commentators have often unsurprisingly pointed out that it works as a barely veiled retelling of Duffy's own initiation into poetry when, at university, she was in a relationship with Liverpool Beat Poet Adrian Henri, and started writing herself. One can see how the supposedly innocent character and her tale of initiation would have been valuable for a feminist woman writer looking for an oblique form of self-expression to avoid direct exposure—a precaution that, when evoking a male poet, might have felt necessary in a 1990s poetry scene still dominated by men.

Furthermore, the use of a modern environment (the “playing fields”, “the factory allotments”, the “railway line”, even the wolf’s “paperback”) as well as the character’s informal expressions such as “I clapped eyes on the wolf”, or the incomplete—and therefore sexually ambiguous—saying “sweet sixteen, never been”, may signal the underlying presence of the poet’s hand. “In many ways the monologue is a method of disclaiming or dislocating oneself from a subject position.” (17-18) Rees-Jones writes. In this poem, the personal is certainly dislocated into a political and poetic tale, which, being placed at the beginning of a collection of feminist poems, functions as a manifesto.

However, one can also read those conspicuously modern and personal elements as a way to underline and even deride the artificiality of the revisionary gesture right from the start of the collection. Not everyone reading or listening to Duffy’s monologue can be expected to know about her relationship with Henri or the context in which they met. Yet, it is quite clear from the second stanza onward that something personal is being expressed.

Moreover, both the use of the fictional voice as a mask, and the undermining of that mask by the conspicuously personal nature of the poem, must be read in the context of performance poetry and the influence of the Liverpool Beat Poets. Even though *The World's Wife* is not an early collection in Duffy’s career, her practice of the dramatic monologue and the rewriting of fairy tales and nursery rhymes originated in her work with Adrian Henri. “Little Red Cap” is therefore part of a performative tradition, and the poem was of course tested, and then read many times in performance.

As such, it is also part of a tradition of political poetry, for the Liverpool Poets, in keeping with Ginsberg’s *Howl*, were largely concerned with public speech, satire

and social critique<sup>2</sup>. But the reference to that tradition is also partly satirical, as the story of the poem is one of emancipation from a male dominated world of poetry.

In fact, "Little Red Cap" is simultaneously indebted to feminist rewritings from the 1970s, a tradition that ranges from Anne Sexton's *Transformations* (1971) to Angela Carter's *Bloody Chamber* and U.A. Fanthorpe's *Standing To* (1982), the latter being a series of rewritings of female Shakespearean monologues, which probably inspired the whole project of *The World's Wife*. In "Little Red Cap", the young woman's clever manipulation of gender roles ("I made quite sure he spotted me") as well as the amused retrospective understanding of her fascination for the poet/wolf are both clear nods to that tradition. At the end of the poem, the speaker is weary of the "greying wolf" howling the "same old song" and decides to take action:

[...] I took an axe  
to a willow to see how it wept. I took an axe to a salmon  
to see how it leapt. I took an axe to the wolf  
as he slept, one chop, scrotum to throat, and saw  
the glistening, virgin white of my grandfather's bones.  
I filled his old belly with stones. I stitched him up.  
Out of the forest I come with my flowers, singing, all alone. (Duffy 1999, 5)

With omnipresent internal rhymes (e.g. "wept" / "leapt" / "slept"; "bones" / "stones") that signal poetry written for the stage as much as the page, and the nursery rhyme-like cruelty of the passage, Duffy clearly emphasizes stylistic features that had already come to characterize her writing. The poem seems to perform her poetic style as the young woman emancipates herself from the male poet. It is therefore partly a commentary on the necessity for female writers to rid themselves of a potentially oppressive male vision of poetry, in order to develop their own voices. Even though *The World's Wife* was published when Duffy's reputation was already well established, it might have felt easier to tell such a personal and political story under the guise of a tale.

In addition, creating a purely naturalistic fictional voice would amount to speaking for the "revised" character from a white, middle class perspective, a pitfall that third wave feminism has continuously tried to avoid. But a similar pitfall would have consisted in a seamless identification with the character, which is therefore prevented by the text's conspicuously, almost disproportionately personal nature. In that perspective, one could say that Duffy manages to preserve the political consistency of her feminist rewriting by paradoxically underlining its personal nature.

Rees-Jones refers "[Duffy's] preoccupation with sameness and difference" (7) to Hélène Cixous's description of the hysterical female body as a space for

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<sup>2</sup> See for instance Henri's "Tonight at Noon", "Mrs Albion You've Got a Lovely Daughter" (Dedicated to Allen Ginsberg), or "Bomb Commercials" in *The Mersey Sound* (1967), an anthology of three famous Liverpool Poets—Adrian Henri, Roger McGough and Brian Patten.



creativity, which is made possible by the multiplication of subjectivity. If such a reference is of course relevant here, I believe that it could be similarly fruitful to read Duffy's complex lyric involvement in her monologues in the light of Jacques Rancière's idea of a process of subjectivization:

What is a process of subjectivization? It is the formation of a one that is not a self but is the relation of a self to an other. [...] Let me rephrase this: a subject is an outsider, or more, an *in-between*. [...] The place of a political subject is an interval or a gap: being together to the extent that we are *in between*: between names, identities, cultures, and so on. (Rancière 1992, 60-62)

According to Rancière, subjectivization is a process located in an interval. It does not reside in one's affirmation of an identity as a member of a group. On the contrary, it is the product of an impossible identification to a group or a specific identity. Which is why, according to Rancière, it is eminently political—it is a way of thinking of oneself while dissenting from the assigned norms of discourse and visibility.

In the same way, Carol Ann Duffy's monologues may be read as both traces and reflections on impossible identifications, an endless game of lyric presence and fictional reality effects that opens up the poetic and political interval between names, identities and cultures. "Little Red Cap" may seem to present us with an apparent identification of the character and an underlying lyrical subject, but the identification process is in fact undermined by the conspicuously personal nature of the world evoked through the poetic voice, to the point that the original character of the tale seems to have become a mere pretext. In the same process, from the very beginning of the collection, the poem questions the possibility of a purely fictional reconstruction through a character's voice. Because one cannot avoid speaking from one's own perspective and position, the poem refuses both identification and the idea of a purely fictional construct. One is left with what seems to be a poetic equivalent to Rancière's view of the "in-between" political subject. In addition to questioning the ethically problematic impulse towards mere ventriloquism, Duffy's monologues also open up an interval for thinking about and performing political subjectivization.

### **Problematic Voices: Distance and Proximity**

There is one type of monologues where it seems impossible to identify the fictional speaker to an underlying lyric presence. Duffy's fascination with the voices of characters whose ideas and behaviours are far removed from her own, is the less well-known counterpoint to her attempt at presenting unheard subaltern voices. For instance, she delights in giving us male voices of patriarchal culture. One very extreme example of that is "Psychopath" (Duffy 2015, 87-89), a monologue that constructs the persona of a women killer through fragments of traumatic memory pitted against snatches of songs, movies or nursery rhymes.



Whilst the creation of mad or abject voices is certainly a tradition that goes back to Browning's *The Ring and the Book*<sup>3</sup>, Duffy's vision is clearly less concerned with distant proto-psychological observation. On the contrary, despite the abject nature of the character constructed by the poem, one can still perceive a link between the monologist and a secondary poetic voice. First, as Rees-Jones points out, by calling the poem "Psychopath", Duffy presents us with a verdict that somehow prevents us from passing a moral judgement on the character. He is declared mad right from the start and thus also exonerated. Secondly, the speaker sees himself through the heroes of Hollywood: Marlon Brando, James Dean, Humphrey Bogart. His self is a masquerade of masculinity and so artificial that it verges on the parodic. It is therefore hard not to hear the controlling voice of the poet, all the more so as the text's fabric of clichés and petrified language is peppered with moments of surprising poetic intensity:

I run my metal comb through the D.A. and pose  
my reflection between dummies in the window at Burton's.  
Lamp light. Jimmy Dean. All over town, ducking and diving,  
my shoes scud sparks against the night. She is in the canal. (Duffy 2015, 87)

As Ian Gregson has pointed out "my shoes scud sparks against the night" is "imagist in rhythm and in the way it juxtaposes light and dark, and sounds like something that would be more comfortable in the third person rather than the first." (Gregson 96) Duffy seems to signal her presence by introducing an uncanny utterance that unravels the impression of a naturalistic piece of discourse.

The character is presented watching his reflection three times in the poem: in the final stanza, he looks at himself in the mirror and his reflection seems to have acquired an independent existence: "My reflection sucks a sour Woodbine and buys me a drink. Here's / looking at you. Deep down I'm talented. She found out." (Duffy 2015, 89) The speaker's own image escapes him, as if the mosaic of clichés that he composed in its stead had ultimately gained a form of independence, as though the desperate quest for identity had resulted in a split personality. The allusion to Humphrey Bogart's famous line in *Casablanca* ("Here's looking at you kid!") is of course part of the irony, as the person being looked at in the movie is a woman, a feminization of his reflection that the macho speaker fails to comprehend, possessed as he is by the male heroes of pop culture. But one can also see this passage as one of those metapoetic hints that signal the hand of the poet. Who's looking at whom? And who's toasting whom? the text seems to ask, and one indeed wonders who is speaking here.

The identity of the woman who "found out" about his talent becomes unclear—is it one of the women he killed, or the poet fascinated by his madness and vulnerability? "Psychopath" creates a space where identification is made

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<sup>3</sup> Or even to Wordsworth's "The Mad Mother", even though the poem is not entirely a monologue as it is introduced by an external speaker.

impossible—because we are confronted with a deranged speaker of course, but also, more interestingly I believe, because his speech is impure and presented as such—it is no one’s speech, a speech of speech. Even though, contrary to what happens in the modernist monologue, the apparent unity of the fictional voice is preserved, “Psychopath” still questions the illusion, the effect of identity that the traditional Browningsque monologue aims to achieve. This voice seems unhinged by a permanent desire to identify with external figures, which only reveals its nature as a sort of Eliotian hollow man—a locus for impossible identification that strives to be heard as a unified voice. The fictional character itself therefore seems to be caught in an impossible identification. Which does not mean that his voice is in-between, as Rancière puts it. But the poem does provide such in-between space when Duffy unobtrusively underlines her involvement and refuses the distanced, naturalistic study that might have been expected from an openly feminist writer. She chooses to produce a relationship, an interval, by both preventing a suspicious identification and by pointing out her own fascination and potential empathy. In an interview for *Verses* she said “The dramatic monologues I’ve written ... are, objective; but also closer to me as the writer than would appear.” (Duffy 1991, 127) By acknowledging that closeness between poet and speaker, Duffy also acknowledges the subjectivization, the in-between nature of the poetic subjects exposed, even when, as in the case of “Psychopath”, they are monstrous.

Even within the hateful voice, Duffy introduces a form of dissent, obviously producing a surprise for the reader, but, more interestingly, producing an impossible voice. Which can be read as an attempt to make complete identification, or complete rejection, impossible. Consequently, a comfortable position is denied to the attentive reader, who is forced to enter a borderline of the familiar and unfamiliar, of subject and object, within and without.

Thus, the title functions as what Rancière calls a “‘wrong’[name]—a misnomer that articulates a gap” (Rancière 1992, 62), because while it may be read as a clinical verdict that exonerates the character, it is also an imperfect judgement because the voice is not entirely his own, as it is also the product of both a lyric involvement and the clichés of masculinity. The word “psychopath” may apply at once to the sexist mass culture *and* the poetic hand that created the fictional voice because it participates in that culture. It may then also be endowed with a more accusatory tone. It designates no one and everyone at once, and therefore only names an interval, a difference for a political subjectivity to inquire into. In that perspective, “Psychopath” also shows that the workings of rape culture are so prevalent that one cannot be content with simply identifying one of its representatives. Duffy’s ventriloquism rejects the fictions of subjectivity and identification, instead they ask us to dissent from comfortable positions mapped out by the structures of political discourse.

### Impossible Identification—Performance and Dissent from the Self

Despite Duffy's interest in problematic and/or mad speakers, a lot of the characters, especially the female characters, constructed through the monologues might be said to invite empathy on the part of the reader. In "Mrs Aesop" (Duffy 1999, 19), a revisionary monologue from *The World's Wife*, Duffy presents us with the voice of the Greek fabulist's wife. Bored and angry with a husband who obsessively pontificates on anything that crosses his field of vision, she vents her rage throughout the first four stanzas of the poem. The reader easily recognizes a continuity between the speaker's anger and the poet's irony directed at a certain male confidence and pretention, which is embodied by Aesop. However, the end of the poem introduces an abrupt twist within that comfortable interpretation:

What race? What sour grapes? What silk purse,  
 sow's ear, dog in a manger, what big fish? Some days  
 I could barely keep awake as the story droned on  
 towards the moral of itself. *Action, Mrs A., speaks louder*  
*than words.* And that's another thing, the sex  
 was diabolical. I gave him a fable one night  
 about a little cock that wouldn't crow, a razor-sharp axe  
 with a heart blacker than the pot that called the kettle.  
*I'll cut off your tail, all right, I said, to save my face.*  
 That shut him up. I laughed last, longest.

The words of the ironically verbose fabulist ("*Action, Mrs A., speaks louder / than words*") are taken literally—Mrs Aesop chooses to act on her own words—she cuts off, both metaphorically and physically, the tale/tail. The angry wife of the pretentious husband turns into a deranged aggressor, as Duffy hints at the famous case of Lorena Bobbitt, who made international headlines when she cut off her husband's penis while he was asleep. The last sentence, with its sensual alliteration, its internal echo "last"/ "longest" and its quiet, relieved almost, feminine ending, breathes out a chilling final note of cruelty. Which makes its reading a rather less consensual process. The initial irony directed at the pompous, insufferable husband turns sour, and the process of identification seems hampered by this classic victim-turned-torturer situation.

Furthermore, in keeping with its reference to the Lorena Bobbitt case, the text alludes to a form of abuse on the part of the husband ("the sex // was diabolical"), thus adding another layer of complexity to the emotional response it seeks to trigger. So, while the poem starts as a rather straightforward feminist charge against men's pretensions and mansplaining, in which the reader can easily sense an ideological identification between speaker and lyric presence, the end of the monologue adds an essential twist—while the literal castration makes it difficult for us to pursue the identification of the speaker and the poetic hand, it is also true

that the character of Mrs Aesop symbolically becomes a figure of the revisionary female writer.

The cutting off of the male narrative is indeed presented as a way of telling her own darker, shorter, more allusive, and possibly more suggestive tale: “I gave him a fable one night / about a little cock that wouldn’t crow, a razor-sharp axe / with a heart blacker than the pot that called the kettle.” The voice in this poem is then also a *mise en abyme* of the whole collection’s poetic gesture, which precisely consists in cutting off the male narrative and replacing it with a female point of view. But what Duffy seems to be adding to this classic revisionary gesture, is an ambiguity and uncertainty regarding the nature of that point of view.

In echoing a famous case of domestic abuse and female revenge, “Mrs Aesop” explores the ethical ambiguity of the reader’s delight in identifying with the speaker. By exhibiting a closeness between the speaker and the figure of the revisionary poet, she also creates an impossible identification and once again opens a space for political subjectivization—the temptation to identify with figures of feminist retribution is questioned in spite, or possibly because of the obvious delight expressed in the final lines. The place for the political subject lies in the in-between as those lines also ask how the violence inherent in a feminist fightback can be politically and poetically elaborated.

The relationship of the speaker and the poet’s voice is both a close and a distant one. While in “Psychopath”, the otherness was never complete and a lyric presence could be felt, in “Mrs Aesop”, the apparent closeness and potential identification of the two remain uncertain, even though the temptation to conflate them is made even stronger by the metapoetic aspect of the story presented. In fact, Duffy also seems to show that the dramatic monologue’s emancipatory charge has to do with the ungraspable and potentially problematic nature of the character it constructs. Which, in turn, also questions the fixed and stable nature of the poet and reader’s identities.

Furthermore, in her analysis of women’s dramatic monologues throughout the XX<sup>th</sup> century, Laura Severin suggests that the dramatic monologues of feminist writers such as Charlotte Mew (1869-1928), Stevie Smith (1902-1971), or Jackie Kay (1961-)<sup>4</sup> has to be read through several analytic frames. Of course, the first is the “distance between [the poet] and the poetic voice that is unavailable with the lyric” (Severin 21). But Severin also emphasizes the importance of these poets’ ability to “[maximize] poetry’s transgressive powers through the rejection of the print page’s promise of autonomy and authority. In so doing, it opens up the British poetic tradition to other figurations of experience, particularly women’s experience, and recreates the genre of poetry as a more explicitly social medium” (Severin 21). She therefore underlines two other frames through which to analyse the feminist poetry she is interested in—first, performance, for it “collide[s] with

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<sup>4</sup> Scottish poet, playwright and novelist Jackie Kay happens to be a close friend and former lover of Duffy’s.

the spoken text, in the process creating an art form that is in dialogue with itself.” Secondly, she also emphasises the importance of the public personas they build.

I have already explained that the poetry reading and the performance of her own work was central in Dufy’s work from the very beginning of her career. “Mrs Aesop” has become one of her favourite monologues at poetry readings, where she revels in playing with the shift in tone of the last two stanzas. Additionally, her public persona has clearly gained credibility and publicity since she was appointed Poet Laureate in 2009. Thus, when reading a poem like “Mrs Aesop”, her new-found place within the literary establishment clearly clashes with the (darkly) playful final lines of the text. In a 2014 reading, Duffy explains that she “pitched the whole poem in [her] mother’s way of talking”, suggesting yet another game of distance and proximity between her and the character. Her delivery is slow, and her face remains deadpan, detached almost, especially when reading the last two stanzas, and in spite of the audience’s hilarity. Her black outfit and her composed attitude at the lectern also add to the sense of the solemnity of her position (Duffy 2014, 17:04-19:30). She thus playfully exploits the gap between the character’s plainspoken anger and her own stature as the UK’s poet Laureate. The presence of the poet reading her text thus functions as another perspective which, as Severin puts it, reinforces an “awareness of the way in which culture produces social categories” (23). What Rancière describes as impossible identification is therefore further questioned by the poem’s inextricably performative nature and Duffy’s own play with her poetic persona.

“Mrs Aesop” shows that in Duffy’s monologues, political subjectivization comes at the cost of allowing for the darker elements of the self to question identification. As Rancière has it, Duffy’s voices are political in that their subjects function together in-between names and identities. It also demonstrates that some monologues are further pluralized by the poet’s use of performance and poetic persona, an off the page existence that adds another dimension to the poems’ sense of dissent from the self. As such, they leave even more space for the process of political subjectivization. In that space, the monologue’s pluralized voice makes room for a community of experience.

### **Conclusion: The Dramatic Monologue as a Community of Experience**

Despite the satirical aspect of the work, Duffy’s play with lyrical presence questions the distant posture of the satirist. She thus creates a surface of interaction for the personal and the impersonal, the subjective and the alien. In that sense, the dramatic monologue becomes a surprising community, where the individual voice is never fully itself, and always potentially other, where some utterances can be both familiar and unfamiliar. Such confusion clearly echoes the democratic regime of aesthetics, as described by Rancière in *The Lost Thread*. It suggests that the personal is political because it is also impersonal. In each singular voice one encounters a potential image or echo of all voices, and the poems constantly reaffirm that community of experience.

One obvious instance of that is Duffy's repeated use of mirror images in her dramatic monologues, since they reflect—pun intended—the interplay of the familiar and the unfamiliar within her poems. They are nodal points where something of that community of experience is revealed. Possibly the most striking example of that is “Oppenheim’s Cup and Saucer” from the collection *Standing Female Nude*:

She asked me to luncheon in fur. Far from  
the loud laughter of men, our secret life stirred.

I remember her eyes, the slim rope of her spine.  
This is your cup, she whispered, and this mine.

We drank the sweet hot liquid and talked dirty.  
As she undressed me, her breasts were a mirror

and there were mirrors in the bed. She said Place  
your legs around my neck, that’s right. Yes. (Duffy 2015, 48)

Like “Woman Seated in the Underground, 1941”, this poem is explicitly written in reference to a work of art, namely a work by Surrealist artist Meret Oppenheim (see picture below). In this poem issues of sexual identity are examined within the context of an apparently forbidden (“our secret life”) lesbian love affair.





Meret Oppenheim. *Object, Paris* (1936). Credit: MoMA's online collection.

The complete anonymity of the speakers is essential because it reinforces the ambiguous nature of the experience described—although the poem appears amidst more explicitly fictional dramatic monologues, it flirts with the suggestion of a lyric evocation. The context of secrecy mentioned before might contradict this idea, but the speaker is clearly anonymized and the other woman is presented as a mirror image in a very Lacanian subtext. Characterization is reduced to a bare minimum and the voice of this other/double is not introduced with italics, as is traditionally the case when another character is heard by a monologist. The two voices even seem to merge at the end of the poem, since the final “yes” could be uttered by the monologist, the other character, or both.

With its undertones of ritual initiation (“This is your cup, she whispered, and this mine.”), its play on mirror images, and its possible hesitation between fiction and lyric expression, this text outlines a community of experience. Yet, within the context of the subversive undifferentiation of this forbidden lesbian romance, the reference to the surrealist work of art reintroduces a difference by undermining the effect of reality created by the fiction of the poem. Moreover, Oppenheim’s work is in itself an obviously subversive object, as it literally sticks the erotically loaded fur over the genteel cup and saucer. It seems to follow a surrealist aesthetics of the encounter of two random objects, but in fact goes beyond a mere encounter as it mimes a fusion. But such fusion is obviously impossible, the seams are apparent and the object remains imperfect, which only reinforces its simultaneously ludicrous and erotic aspect.

Duffy’s poem follows the same logic, and the presence/absence of the work of art adds the same impossible conflation it tried to achieve. The monologue stages an encounter of mirror images. It also confronts fiction and lyric expression. But the title still underlines how difference manifests itself in it, for the poem seems to be both appropriately and inappropriately named. The cup and the fur do appear in it, so does the eroticism; however, like Oppenheim’s work, they only appear as a web of disparate elements whose unity has to do with their differences within the community of the poem. Moreover, the poem’s regular alternation of rhymed and unrhymed couplets is only apparent as the final rhyme is imperfect, while the first couplet (“spine” / “mine”) contained a perfect rhyme. Which in turn wrecks the apparent symmetry of the poem’s architecture—its pairings remain imperfect and fusion is hampered.

Therefore, the community of experience staged here is not one of undifferentiation where the poet’s voice cannot be distinguished from the speaker’s—it is, on many levels, the experience of an encounter between the familiar and the unfamiliar that subverts and redistributes traditional places and modes of perception.

Duffy’s uncertain lyric presence in her dramatic monologues allows for a constant re-distribution of the sensible, to once again use one of Jacques Rancière’s expression. The revisionary female monologues are made even more



subversive by presenting them as spaces of exchange between poet and speaker, rather than as merely the imaginary re-creation or the process of identification of a contemporary feminist writer. As for the more disturbing figures who are given a voice in her poems, by introducing a poetic presence within their totally alien discourse, she avoids facile condemnation or fascination. Instead, she demonstrates the presence of the familiar within the radically unfamiliar. Her poetic art is one that works in the interval, in the in-between, and thus presents us with political and poetic subjectivization rather than stable identities. Thanks to an ethical doubt cast on the impulse towards ventriloquism, Duffy reminds us that the personal can remain political only when articulated with a sense of the otherness that haunts subjective experience.

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