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**“That’s the How and the Why and the Where”: Literary
Tradition and Revisionism in the Poetry of Eavan Boland
and Carol Ann Duffy**

Belo Horizonte

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Dissertação apresentada ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Estudos Literários da Faculdade de Letras da Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais como requisito parcial para obtenção do título de Mestre em Estudos Literários.

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I examine the works *Outside History* and *The World's Wife*, collections of poems by Eavan Boland and Carol Ann Duffy, respectively. My main goal is to make a comparative analysis of their works as feminist re-visions in order to discuss the implications of such re-visions to women's literary history and tradition. First, I discuss the historical context in which women have produced literature throughout the centuries. Particularly, it interests me to explore the main aspects that somehow have contributed to distance men's literary production from women's. Second, I analyze how Boland and Duffy explore different themes in their works from a revisionist perspective, considering Adrienne Rich's concept of "re-vision." I argue that their revisionist poetry contests the Western literary tradition and the canon by means of transgression and the concept of profanation, based on Giorgio Agamben's theorizations. Finally, I consider the differences and similarities in the way each author explores the main themes in their works in order to transgress and profane the literary canon and tradition. I argue that, as result of their profanation, the authors help to build and consolidate women's literary history and tradition.

Keywords: literary tradition, literary history, transgression, profanation, revisionism

RESUMO

Nesta dissertação examino as obras *Outside History* e *The World's Wife*, coletâneas de poemas de Eavan Boland e Carol Ann Duffy, respectivamente. Meu principal objetivo é fazer uma análise comparativa de suas obras, que podem ser consideradas revisões feministas, e discutir as implicações de tais revisões para a história e a tradição literária de autoria feminina. Primeiramente, discuto o contexto histórico no qual as mulheres produziram literatura através dos séculos. Particularmente, interessa-me explorar os principais aspectos que, de alguma forma, contribuíram para distanciar a literatura produzida por homens daquela produzida por mulheres. Em segundo lugar, analiso como Boland e Duffy exploram diferentes temas em suas obras a partir de uma perspectiva revisionista, considerando o conceito de “revisão” de Adrienne Rich. Argumento que a poesia revisionista dessas autoras contesta a tradição literária ocidental e o cânone por meio da transgressão e do conceito de profanação, baseando-me na teorização de Giorgio Agamben. Finalmente, considero as diferenças e semelhanças na maneira como cada autora explora os principais temas em suas obras de maneira a transgredir e profanar o cânone e a tradição literária. Argumento que, como resultado de sua profanação, as autoras atuam no sentido de construir e consolidar a história e a tradição literária de autoria feminina.

Palavras-chave: tradição literária, história literária, transgressão, profanação, revisionismo.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	9
Chapter One – Where are the Women Poets?	16
Chapter Two – Eavan Boland: A Poet of Small Things	42
2.1 Womanhood or Private Stories	48
2.2 Sisterhood or Shared Stories	56
2.3 Writing Back to Mythology	63
2.4 A Profane Writer	73
Chapter Three – Carol Ann Duffy: A Tongue-in-Cheek Poet	77
3.1 Mythology or “Girls, forget what you’ve read”	78
3.2 The Bible or “ain’t life a bitch”	96
3.3 Fairy Tale or “I had the language, girls”	105
3.4 Profane to Survive	115
Final Considerations	118
Works Cited	125

INTRODUCTION

It would be ambitious beyond my daring, I thought, looking about the shelves for books that were not there, to suggest to the students of those famous colleges that they should rewrite history, though I own that it often seems a little queer as it is, unreal, lop-sided; but why should they not add a supplement to history, calling it, of course, by some in conspicuous name so that women might figure there without impropriety?

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

Eavan Boland and Carol Ann Duffy are both renowned names in contemporary Irish and British poetry respectively. They have in common a revisionist and feminist approach to their work. Boland was born in Dublin in 1944 and has a long career that began in 1962 with the publication of her first collection of poems, *23 poems*. Since then, she has been a prolific writer, having published several works such as *The War Horse*, in 1975, *In Her Own Image*, in 1980, *In a Time of Violence*, in 1994, and in 2014, *A Woman without a Country*. In addition, she has also published collections of essays such as *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in our Time* in 1995 and *A Journey with Two Maps: Becoming a Woman Poet* in 2011. Duffy was born in 1955 in Glasgow, Scotland, but she was raised in England. She has published more than ten collections of poetry such as *Mean Time* in 1993, *Rapture* in 2005, which earned her the T.S. Eliot Prize, and *The Bees* in 2011. She has also written poetry for children such as *The Oldest Girl in the World*, published in 2000, and *Queen Munch and Queen Nibble*, published in 2002. Furthermore, she is also a playwright whose works include *Cavern of Dreams* (1984) and *Casanova* (2007).

In this thesis, I focus on two of their most popular books of poetry, *Outside History* (1990) by Boland and *The World's Wife* (1999) by Duffy. My purpose is to make a comparative analysis of the authors' feminist re-visions and their implications to women's

literary history and tradition. I claim that their re-vision somehow profanes and transgresses the Western canon and literary tradition; therefore they reclaim a literary space that was often denied to women in the past.

The concept of “re-vision” that I adopt throughout the thesis is the one proposed by Adrienne Rich in her 1972 essay, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision.” Since then, Rich’s revisionist concept has been recurrently employed and expanded by scholars such as Liedeke Plate, Sandra Bermann, Maggie Humm, among others. Women writers also have responded to Rich’s call in the last decades producing revisionist literature. Boland and Duffy are certainly part of this movement in which writers and poets look back at what has been written in the past in search of what has often been neglected: women’s point of view.

In *Outside History* and *The World’s Wife*, the poems are written from a revisionist and feminist position. Irish history and literature, classical mythology, women’s condition and the canon are the main targets of Boland’s re-vision in *Outside History*. The poetic voices are mostly ordinary women facing experiences that may seem unimportant, but which often turn out to be enriching, transformative, but also painful. In *The World’s Wife*, Duffy revises canonical works in which female characters are usually mere personifications of male ideas of femininity. Unlike in *Outside History*, Duffy’s poetic voices are predominantly well-known characters of Western literature that are released from their narrative captivity.

In order to choose which poems to analyze, my criterion of choice was that they should have enough aspects in common so that they could be grouped into themes. Thus, I propose three major themes which somehow the authors approach from a revisionist perspective. The poems chosen for analysis from *Outside History* were “The Shadow Doll,” “Object Lessons,” “We Were Neutral in the War,” “Hanging Curtains with an Abstract Pattern in a Child’s Room,” “The Rooms of Other Women Poets,” “The Achill Woman,” “We are Always too Late,” “The Making of an Irish Goddess,” “Daphne Heard with Horror

the Addresses of the God” and “A False Spring”. From *The World’s Wife*, the poems chosen were “Medusa,” “Pygmalion’s Bride,” “*from* Mrs. Tiresias,” “Eurydice,” “Delilah,” “Salome,” “Queen Herod,” “Little Red-Cap” and “Mrs. Beast”.

Some critics have approached Boland’s and Duffy’s work through feminist perspectives. In a dissertation entitled “Muscling in: A Study of Contemporary Women Poets and English Poetic Tradition,” written by Vicki Bertram in 1992, the works of the two poets analyzed in this dissertation are also discussed. The second chapter focuses on Boland’s career and her main works published until then, including *Outside History*. However, precisely because Bertram does not focus on specific works by Boland, she does not provide a detailed analysis of the poems in *Outside History*, differently from the work I develop in this thesis. Besides, I disagree with Bertram when she claims that: “Eavan Boland could be described, perhaps harshly, as a dutiful daughter of patriarchal poetry” (59). As I discuss in the chapter about Boland, I believe she has been a persistent critic of what Bertram refers to as “patriarchal poetry.” The third chapter of Bertram’s dissertation focuses on Carol Ann Duffy and Deborah Randall and their use of dramatic monologues. *The World’s Wife* had not yet been published so the chapter discusses Duffy’s first works, *Standing Female Nude* (1985), *Selling Manhattan* (1987) and *The Other Country* (1990). Again, she does not analyze in details the poems in these books. In my thesis, in contrast, I make a detailed analysis of the poems in *The World’s Wife* mentioned above. Bertram’s dissertation, unlike my study in this thesis, does not make a specific comparison between Boland’s *Outside History* and Duffy’s *The World’s Wife*.

Many have been the works published on Boland’s poetry. In 1993, the journal *Irish University Review* published a special issue about Eavan Boland. Several contributors such as Victor Luftig and R. T. Smith discuss Boland’s trajectory and her main works published until then. Smith’s essay “Altered Light: *Outside History*” recognizes Boland’s attempt to deal

with myth and history while focusing on the “penumbral motif” (90) in the book. In her 2001 article “Beautiful Labors: Lyricism and Feminist Revisions in Eavan Boland’s Poetry,” Christy Burns writes: “I will here be exploring the tension in Boland’s work between her political investment in representing women – especially the laboring poor – and her attraction to beautiful images and seductive, lyrical language” (218). Thus, although Burns mentions Boland’s interest in Rich’s work, her focus differs from mine.

In the collection of essays *Inside Out: Women Negotiating, Subverting, Appropriating Public and Private Space*, published in 2008, Sara Sullivan’s essay “Writing Inside and Outside: Eavan Boland’s Poetry of the Domestic Space” discusses the importance of the private sphere in Boland’s work, a discussion that is also relevant for this thesis. Jody Allen Randolph in turn published in 2013 a work on Eavan Boland in which she states that she “will follow Boland’s evolution from text to context, from Irish poet to a woman whose poetry, written in Ireland at a time of change, has been welcomed as broadening factor in other poetic conversations” (xvi). Randolph discusses Boland’s major works, including *Outside History*, and compares Boland’s and Adrienne Rich’s works as women whose poetry has strongly influenced other female writers. Her focus, however, differs from the one I adopt here.

Duffy’s work has also received some critical attention. Jane Dowson and Alice Entwistle in *A History of Twentieth-Century British Women’s Poetry*, published in 2005, recognize Duffy’s influence on other poets who could be called, according to the critics, “Duffy-esque” (215). They also give special attention to Boland’s lyric. The collection of essays *The Poetry of Carol Ann Duffy*, edited by Angelica Michelis and Antony Rowland in 2003, brings several perspectives on Duffy’s work, including Jeffrey Wainwright’s essay about Duffy’s appropriation of Ovid’s work, whose arguments support some of my discussions of Duffy’s poems. Susanna Braund also discusses Duffy’s use of myth and establishes a comparison between Duffy’s poems about mythology in *The World’s Wife* and

Margaret Atwood's and Marguerite Yourcenar's work in her 2012 article, "We're here too, the ones without names." Dowson also published in 2016 *Carol Ann Duffy: Poet for Our Times* in which she discusses Duffy's career. Not so many critics have studied Duffy's work so far, when compared to the number of articles on Boland's, perhaps because Duffy began publishing in the 1970s while Boland has been publishing since the 1960s. It is noteworthy that the two poets have had some of their poems published together in *Penguin Modern Poets* vol. 2, along with Vicki Feaver. Despite that, critics have paid little attention to the works of these two poets from a comparative perspective.

The critical texts chosen for my discussions in this thesis are mostly from feminist literary criticism since they provide theoretical support for the focus of this research on feminist re-vision and the consolidation of women's literary history and tradition in Boland's and Duffy's works. I organize the thesis into three chapters. In chapter one, "Where are the Women Poets?," I give a concise historical context of the main difficulties faced by women in order to write. I discuss some aspects that throughout the centuries have had some impact on literature produced by women. The chapter highlights social and cultural aspects such as education, which I discuss relying on the classic works of Mary Astell, Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. Another aspect, financial independence, is analyzed through Woolf's famous approach to the subject. Another important discussion that I address is the conflict between women writers and the images generated by male writers in Western tradition, a theme that Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have extensively explored in *The Madwoman in the Attic*.

The second chapter, "Eavan Boland: A Poet of Small Things," begins with a brief contextualization of Boland's work. Then, the chapter is divided into four sections: "Womanhood or Private Stories," "Sisterhood or Shared Stories," "Writing Back to Mythology" and "A Profane Writer." In the first three sections, I analyze the poems in

Outside History mentioned above considering the themes they have in common and how Boland addresses other issues such as marriage, motherhood, domesticity, tradition and history. I try to discuss each poem in an attempt to demonstrate how Boland objects to the conventional depictions of women in Western literature. I also debate the possible reasons for the appeal of Ovid's work to women writers, including Boland and Duffy. To conclude the chapter, I connect Boland's re-vision to the concept of profanation discussed by Giorgio Agamben in *Profanations*. My argument is that through transgression, Boland somehow profanes the Western canon.

The third chapter, "Carol Ann Duffy: a Tongue-in-Cheek Poet," is focused on Duffy's *The World's Wife*. In the first section, "Mythology or 'Girls, forget what you've read,'" I return to the discussion of myths in the works of women writers and especially the presence of Ovid in the work of Duffy. I analyze how Duffy reworks stories of *Metamorphoses* and how she uses them to address topics such as jealousy, female sexuality, gender roles and poetry itself. The second section, "The Bible or 'ain't life a bitch'," addresses the Bible from a literary perspective, considering the works of Northrop Frye and J. R. Porter. Then, the focus is on the biblical rereadings from a gender perspective, since this is Duffy's main approach to her biblical discussions. I analyze Duffy's questioning of the misogyny perpetuated in biblical stories. "Fairy Tale or 'I had the language, girls'" is the third section in which there is also a discussion of the term fairy tale based on the works of Steven Swann Jones, Donald Haase, Roger Sale and Maria Cristina Martins and the role of gender in such stories enriched by the arguments of Jeana Jorgensen and Jack Zipes. Here, Duffy also addresses gender roles, the writing of poetry and female sexuality. In the last section, "Profane to Survive," I also point out to Duffy's transgressive vocation and how, as Boland, she manages to profane Western literary tradition and the canon. The conclusion emphasizes

how the discussions in this thesis help to support my claim that the poets profane and transgress the Western canon and literary tradition through their poetry.

The themes I work with in each chapter help us understand the implications of Boland's and Duffy's re-vision. For that purpose, this work discusses the similarities and differences in their works, their use of transgression and profanation and the importance of gender issues for both authors. Finally, it is important to highlight how this research is important for the field of literary studies in general and especially for feminist literary criticism since it discusses revisionism and how it can be used to unveil centuries of misrepresentation of women in Western literary history. The relevance of this thesis also lies in the fact that it gives prominence to Boland's and Duffy's poetry as these two influential women poets are not well known in Brazil, besides the fact that there are not many publications that compare the work of both authors.

CHAPTER ONE:

Where are the Women Poets?

Did I my lines intend for public view,
 How many censures would their faults pursue,
 Some would, because such words they do affect,
 Cry they're insipid, empty, uncorrect.
 Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea, "The Introduction"

Taking us by and large, we're a queer lot
 We women who write poetry. And when you think
 How few of us there've been, it's queerer still.
 Amy Lowell, "The Sisters"

Somewhere you are writing or have written in
 a room you came to as I come to this
 Eavan Boland, "The Rooms of Other Women Poets"

But the Gods are like publishers,
 usually male,
 and what you doubtless know of my tale
 is the deal.
 Carol Ann Duffy, "Eurydice"

When it comes to literary tradition, it may be said that women have been given a limited space. In the special case of poetry, women have always had more space as muses than as authors. In her famous essay, *A Room of One's Own*, first published in 1929, Virginia Woolf tries to give an overview of women's literary history. When faced with the work of women in the nineteenth century, she writes: "And here, for the first time, I found several

shelves given up entirely to the works of women. But why, I could not help asking, as I ran my eyes over them, were they, with very few exceptions, all novels?" (604). Woolf's argument is that even with the evidence of the increase in the numbers of writings by women, their presence in poetry was still scarce.

Nonetheless, Woolf was able to find some women poets who had been forgotten over the years. Her pioneer critical work in *A Room of One's Own*, and some of her other essays about women authors and literature, were certainly responsible for redeeming women writers and poets who had been relegated to oblivion. The fact is that, despite difficulties such as a poor education, the lack of financial independence, gender bias, confinement to the private space, women have always written. These obstacles, however, distanced men's literary production from women's. Regarding the differences between education available for men and women in the past, Barbara J. Whitehead acknowledges that: "Women were officially denied entrance to universities until the nineteenth century. If the definition of what it is to be an educated woman is to be a woman educated like a man, then by definition there would be very few educated women in early modern Europe" (x). Whitehead's argument is that women were educated differently and had no access to the kind of education given to men.

As far back as the seventeenth century, this educational gap between the sexes was viewed with concern. British writer and philosopher Mary Astell published in 1694 *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, in which she defends education for women: "For since God has given women as well as men intelligent souls, why should they be forbidden to improve them?" (191). Religion was one of the main themes in Astell's writing, therefore, coherently, she uses God as an advocate of women's right to an equal education. Nearly one hundred years later, in 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* makes a new plea. In what might be considered one of the earliest feminist works, Wollstonecraft argues that

women's education is the only way to reduce the inequality between the sexes. In the introduction, she expresses her indignation at the kind of education offered to women:

The conduct and manners of women, in fact, evidently prove that their minds are not in a healthy state; for, like the flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty ... One cause of this barren blooming I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers. (258)

Wollstonecraft's keen statement shows us today how the education system was unfair and made in a way so that women could never reach their intellectual potential and would, thus, remain in a docile and submissive position.

Surprisingly, in the nineteenth century, a man was responsible for endorsing the task of arguing in favor of women's schooling. In 1869, John Stuart Mill writes *The Subjection of Women*, an essay in which he makes a case for women's rights. One of the topics covered by Mill is education. He writes:

When we put together three things – first, the natural attraction between opposite sexes; secondly, the wife's entire dependence on the husband, every privilege or pleasure she has being either his gift, or depending entirely on his will; and lastly, that the principal object of human pursuit, consideration, and all objects of social ambition, can in general be sought or obtained by her only through him, it would be a miracle if the object of being attractive to men had not become the polar star of feminine education and formation of character. (27-28)

In Mill's view, formal education offered to women served no other purpose than to make them compliant wives who desire nothing else than to please their husbands. His argument is similar to Wollstonecraft's because he also believes that education offered to women at the time was in fact a kind of indoctrination. Women had to learn just what they needed in order to perform the roles established for them by a patriarchal society. Obviously, being a writer was not one of these roles.

The issue of women's education is also one of the aspects addressed by Virginia Woolf when imagining what would have happened if Shakespeare had had a sister: "She was as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world as he was. But she was not sent to school. She had no chance of learning grammar and logic, let alone of reading Horace and Virgil" (592). For Woolf, despite having as much potential as her brother, Shakespeare's sister would have no chance to develop her talent because of both her lack of education and the prejudice from society. Nevertheless, women writers emerged and were popular, such as Anne Finch, Countess of Winchelsea, Margaret of Newcastle, Margaret Cavendish and Aphra Behn; all of them mentioned by Woolf in the fourth chapter of *A Room of One's Own*. However, they also acknowledged the difficulty for women to write and to be recognized as writers. In "The Introduction," Anne Finch writes: "Alas! a woman that attempts the pen / Such an intruder on the rights of men, / Such a presumptuous creature is esteemed, / The fault can by no virtue be redeemed" (168). Her speaker is haunted by the gender bias of the time, even though Finch herself was a recognized poet.

All of these writers lived in the seventeenth century and, except for Behn, were part of the nobility. This situation certainly corroborates Woolf's famous and also controversial statement that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (565). Woolf argues that, in order to write, a woman needs not only talent, but also material conditions to do so. When one thinks about periods of history when women did not have their

own income, and had as main social function being wives and mothers, Woolf's statement brings forth a relevant argument.

Woolf also realizes that although the lack of financial conditions can be an obstacle to any writer, this condition emerged as an even greater barrier to women: "But for women, I thought, looking at the empty shelves, these difficulties were infinitely more formidable. In the first place, to have a room of her own, let alone a quiet room or a soundproof room, was out of question, unless her parents were exceptionally rich or very noble, even up to the beginning of the nineteenth century" (595-596). Woolf insists that a writer needs a space where she can work and for centuries this was out of reach for most women.

The issue of money and its relation to women's conditions to dedicate themselves to writing poetry is also acknowledged by George Parfitt, who argues that "the more materially privileged a woman was, the better the chance that she was literate – and the technical skills of poetry generally required a good education, while prose (rather than verse) was the likely medium of underclass literacy (although such prose, much influenced by the Bible, was often strongly rhythmical)" (223). Parfitt believes that in order to write poetry a writer must have access to quality education and this was, for a long time, only available to wealthy women.

Besides that, women were often criticized for gender bias, as Finch's poem corroborates. Deborah Kennedy argues that: "If men could be ridiculed for their attempts at verse, so could women, and so they were. What some women writers objected to was their work being critiqued just because they were women" (10). It is certainly not surprising that in a male-oriented literary tradition, literature produced by women is appraised from a gendered and often negative perspective. Given that literature produced by men was for ages the one considered standard, women writers were judged by that standard.

Woolf reminds us that in relation to men's and women's point of view, it is men's view that prevails: "it is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values which

have been made by the other sex; naturally, this is so. Yet it is the masculine values that prevail. Speaking crudely, football and sport are ‘important’; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes ‘trivial’ ” (609). The writer thus argues that the same criterion applies to literary criticism: “This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room” (Woolf 609). For Woolf, the judgment on the value of a book is generally made with preference to themes considered universal and noble, which are often associated with a masculine worldview.

US feminist poet and essayist Adrienne Rich felt the weight of being a young woman poet having to deal with such worldview. In her famous essay, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” she maintains that: “I have been taught that poetry should be ‘universal’, which meant, of course, nonfemale. Until then I had tried very much *not* to identify myself as a female poet” (22-23). Rich confesses her hesitation in revealing herself as a poet who happens to be a woman. She probably did not want her poetry to be judged on the basis of any gender bias. This means that, even though she writes in the twentieth century, Rich still shares with her predecessors the same feelings of inadequacy about being a woman poet. More than two hundred years earlier, Anne Finch had written in “The Apology”: “Each woman has her weakness; mine indeed / Is still to write though hopeless to succeed” (178). The reader can easily see from these lines that the poetic voice considers her writing not as a gift but, instead, as a curse.

Historically, poetry written by women was considered “minor,” simply because the author is a woman. Indeed, even the vocabulary used to describe a woman's poem is distinct, as Alicia Suskin Ostriker observes:

We seldom encounter, in praise of women poets, terms like *great, powerful, forceful, masterly, violent, large* or *true*. The language used to express literary

admiration in general presumes the masculinity of the author, the work, and the act of creation – but not if the author is a woman. Complimentary adjectives of choice then shift toward the diminutives: *graceful*, *subtle*, *elegant*, *delicate*, *cryptic*, and, above all, *modest*; for the most continuous term of approbation for a woman poet from the early nineteenth century to the day before yesterday has been *modesty*. (3)

Ostriker argues that the kind of criticism of poetry produced by women, even when it is positive, reinforces gender bias. The use of different adjectives to describe the work of men and women makes it clear that writing is not evaluated in a neutral way. Otherwise, there would be no verses like Anne Bradstreet's in "The Prologue":

I am obnoxious to each carping tongue
 Who says my hand a needle better fits;
 A poet's pen all scorn I should thus wrong,
 For such despite they cast on female wits;
 If what I do prove well, it won't advance,
 They'll say it's stolen, or else it was by chance. (84)

The poetic voice in this poem discloses the kind of impasse a woman poet experiences. Even if she can prove her intellectual skills, she runs the risk of being discredited.

How can women write poetry, then? This is a question that pervades Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's famous work *The Madwoman in the Attic*. When analyzing Harold Bloom's theory about the anxiety of influence, they realize that Bloom focuses only on men's tradition. They ask: "Where, then, does the female poet fit in? Does she want to annihilate a 'forefather' or a 'foremother'? What if she can find no models, no precursors? Does she have a muse, and what is its sex?" (47). Gilbert and Gubar believe that Bloom's model cannot give an adequate account of women poets and their tradition.

Going back to Virginia Woolf, when she tries to answer her own question about the scarcity of poetry books written by women, she observes that: “The original impulse was to poetry. The ‘supreme head of song’ was a poetess. Both in France and England the women poets precede the women novelists” (604). In Woolf’s view, women should have written more poetry since their relation with the genre goes back to ancient times, to Sappho, for example. A mythical figure, of whom little is known, Sappho is probably the most famous woman poet from antiquity and her name comes up often when the subject is poetry produced by women. However, legends related to her sexuality and the circumstances of her death caused her to become a conflicting personage, as Deborah Kennedy argues:

Sappho was an iconic figure, but the spectacular stories surrounding her life have made her a mixed blessing as a model for women poets. She won respect for her poetry but disapproval for her personal life. So, a woman poet might be praised as an “English Sappho”, but the term was frequently followed by a qualifying remark about her having the virtue that Sappho apparently lacked.

(5)

As can be seen from this quotation, although Sappho has become a kind of foremother for women poets, her reputation preceded her work. As a result, Sappho could be imitated as a poet, but never in her behavior.

Social and professional reputation intermingled often unfavorably for women writers; something of which Aphra Behn is a good example. Her importance in women's literary history can be measured by Woolf's praising of her: “All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, which is, most scandalously but rather appropriately, in Westminster Abbey, for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds” (604). For Woolf, a woman, like Behn, who had managed to become a professional writer in the seventeenth century, was an example to be followed. However, despite being a successful

writer during her lifetime, in the course of time her work was gradually forgotten. According to Jane Spencer:

The variety of her work, and the extent of her success in her lifetime, meant that she had the potential to be very influential after her death. The eighteenth-century construction of Restoration writing in general, and Behn's in particular, as decadent and salacious, had profound effects on the tenor of that influence, and made her legacy to later female writers an uneasy one. (3)

Spencer argues that Behn had the requirements to become part of the canon, but the morality of the centuries after her death prevented her to receive the recognition that she deserves. When writing verses like: "A many kisses did he give / And I returned the same, / Which made me willing to receive / That which I dare not name" (111), Behn is challenging the sexual conduct expected of women. Thus, her influence on future writers and poets was misrepresented for centuries until she was rediscovered in the twentieth century, especially through Woolf's famous reference to her works.

Behn did not fit the moral standards of the eighteenth century, much less in the necessary modesty that was then required of women writers. Janet Todd claims that: "Not content with shocking the nation with her lewdness, Behn also failed in a proper sense of literary privacy. An eighteenth-century woman writer who went public did so with a panoply of excuse and subservience. Behn, however, stoutly declared that she was writing for fame" (2). Todd believes Behn had against her not only her sexual behavior, which was considered inappropriate, but also her search for recognition that was then allowed only to men.

Could it be just coincidence that the behavior of two important figures of women's literary history, Sappho and Aphra Behn, was used to undervalue their work? It seems clear that women were not welcome in an activity considered masculine. Gilbert and Gubar acknowledge the feeling of inadequacy of women as writers when analyzing a poem by Anne

Finch: “Because they are by definition male activities ... writing, reading, and thinking are not only alien but also inimical to ‘female’ characteristics” (8). Gilbert and Gubar emphasize that historically, writing, as well as other intellectual activities, were frequently attributed to men. Thus, women writers often felt as invaders in a field to which apparently they did not belong.

Especially when it comes to tradition, Gilbert and Gubar argue that literary tradition can be understood as an essentially male tradition. They dare to ask: “Is a pen a metaphorical penis?” (3). Gilbert and Gubar come to an answer to their own question when analyzing a letter of Gerard Manley Hopkins: “Male sexuality ... is not just analogically but actually the essence of literary power. The poet’s pen is in some sense (even more than figuratively) a penis” (4). The writers believe the pen metaphorically represents the authority of male gender and this belief guides the ideas they discuss in *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Then, considering literary history as something in which the presence of men predominates, the authors question the influence over women writers of the images created by men in the Victorian period: “a woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of ‘angel’ and ‘monster’ which male authors have generated for her” (17). Gilbert and Gubar argue that stereotypical images produced by men’s writing generate enormous difficulty for women writers who need to struggle to overcome them.

Years earlier, Woolf had addressed some of the concerns echoed in Gilbert and Gubar’s theory in her essay “Professions for Women” in which she describes the effect a famous Victorian poem, *The Angel in the House* by Coventry Patmore, had on her as a writer: “It was she who used to come between me and my paper when I was writing reviews. It was she who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her” (141). The “she” to which Woolf refers is Honoria, “the angel in the house,” who was based on Patmore’s wife. When one reads some verses of the poem, it is possible to see what bothered

Woolf: “In mind and manners how discreet! / How artless in her very art; / How candid in discourse; how sweet / The concord of her lips and heart; / How simple and how circumspect; / How subtle and how fancy-free” (51). The woman described by the poet is an idealized one. All the adjectives used by Patmore place her as someone who cannot be human, since apparently she has no faults, only virtues.

If this angelic image of woman was so influential in the nineteenth-century, this is due to the fact that the image of "the angel" embodies a cult that had never ceased to exist. According to Gilbert and Gubar in *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, the importance of Jesus's mother underwent a change during the Middle Ages: “From the twelfth century to about the fifteenth, Mariolatry – the cult of the Virgin – swept Europe” (5). In the medieval world, religion had great influence on people's lives and the worship of a sinless woman could redeem all other women, as acknowledged by Gilbert and Gubar: “Mary’s grace sanctifies all women, even an ostensibly fallen one such as Christ’s disciple the reformed prostitute Mary Magdalene. Thus, though Mary herself may have been unique ... even ordinary women are not to be excluded from the queendom of heaven that she rules” (6). Gilbert and Gubar’s argument is that in the collective imaginary all women were considered sinners, but even the worst of all could follow the Virgin's example and be saved. As a result of this belief, stereotypical notions about women were maintained. If they were not holy and pure like Mary, this would mean they could only be like her opposite, Eve.

In the Bible, Eve is seen as the other half of Adam, the one that was created to be his companion and should be submissive to him. She is also portrayed as responsible for the Original Sin and the resulting expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Therefore, being daughters of Eve, all women were sinners until proven otherwise. They had to try to achieve the unachievable, to be as pure and sinless as the Virgin Mary, or to settle for being eternal sinners like Eve.

The myth of Lilith also reinforces the image of women as sinful by nature. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar tell her story:

Created not from Adam's rib but, like him, from the dust, Lilith was Adam's first wife, according to apocryphal Jewish lore. Because she considered herself his equal, she objected to lying beneath him, so that when he tried to force her submission, she became enraged and, speaking the Ineffable Name, flew away to the edge of the Red Sea to reside with demons. Threatened by God's angelic emissaries, told that she must return or daily lose a hundred of her demon children to death, Lilith preferred punishment to patriarchal marriage, and she took her revenge against both God and Adam by injuring babies – especially male babies, who were traditionally thought to be more vulnerable to her attacks. (35)

It is a story, as well as Eve's, that endorses women's subservience to men. Lilith's sin was to think she could be equal to Adam when, in fact, she was supposed to be an obedient wife. Both women, Lilith and Eve, who disobeyed God's command, dared to challenge male authority, thus they became symbols of female sinfulness.

Often endorsing this ideology, the history of literature displays several works in which women are represented in the binary opposition of angel or monster, as acknowledged by Gilbert and Gubar. They observe that: "The ideal woman that male authors dream of generating is always an angel" (20), nevertheless, also according to the critics: "repeatedly, throughout most male literature, a sweet heroine inside the house (like Honoria) is opposed to a vicious bitch outside" (Gilbert and Gubar 29). While men authors idealize a submissive woman, they also denigrate the independent woman.

One of the main arguments of Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* is that the image of a "monster" in particular is extremely harmful to women writers: "to the extent

that they [feminine monsters] incarnate male dread of women and, specifically, male scorn of female creativity, such characters have drastically affected the self-images of women writers, negatively reinforcing those messages of submissiveness conveyed by their angelic sisters” (29-30). For the critics, supposedly evil feminine characters were devised as a way of indoctrinating women to follow suit good characters who are, not coincidentally, those that match the masculine fantasy of femininity.

Adrienne Rich also suggests that women writers in search of inspiration are hampered by feminine images created by male writers:

She comes up against something that negates everything she is about: she meets the image of Woman in books written by men. She finds a terror and a dream, she finds a beautiful pale face, she finds La Belle Dame Sans Merci, she finds Juliet or Tess or Salomé, but precisely what she does not find is that absorbed, drudging, puzzled, sometimes inspired creature, herself, who sits at a desk trying to put words together. (16)

Rich’s argument is that when a woman decides to write she comes across an imaginary constructed by an essentially masculine literary tradition in which she cannot recognize herself. Surprisingly, the poet does not refer to the nineteenth-century context, but to her own experience of writing in the twentieth century. This means that the influence of these images pervaded not only Victorian women's writing, but also influenced the woman writer of the second half of the twentieth century. So it makes perfect sense that in this article Rich has developed her concept of re-vision. Re-vision for the author is the “act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction” (11). Rich urges women writers to fight the images from the past that dehumanize them. Mythological and stereotypical images of women are part of a tradition that, according to Rich, needs to be revised.

When it comes to literature produced by women, the main question to be asked regards literary tradition. Considering that, “Western literary history *is* overwhelmingly male – or, more accurately, patriarchal” (Gilbert and Gubar 47), it is fair to inquire if, after all: is there any women’s literary tradition? If we think of the number of women writers throughout history, from the best known to those that have been rediscovered since the work of Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own*, the answer is yes. The problem seems to be that women’s literary tradition has not been consolidated, given that: “Over the last twenty-five years, feminist research has given us knowledge of women writers who had been (almost) erased from the record, and has made it necessary to revise the records we already had” (Spencer 1). Spencer argues that women’s writings from the past need to be reestablished and revised.

In his famous essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” T.S. Eliot writes: “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him for contrast and comparison, among the dead” (44). Eliot is saying that any writer is inexorably inserted in a relationship with his predecessors. This means that a writer’s forefathers have a direct influence on his work and also on the relevance of this work. That is, to be relevant, the writer and his work have to dialogue with what was done before. If this dialogue is successful, then we have a tradition.

Harold Bloom, whose theories often displease feminist critics, gives us his view about literary tradition in *The Western Canon*: “Tradition is not only a handing-down or process of benign transmission; it is also a conflict between past genius and present aspiration, in which the prize is literary survival or canonical inclusion” (8-9). For Bloom, tradition is actually a battle between those who have shaped it in the past and those who hope to become part of it. If we consider the prize of being included in the canon mentioned by Bloom, this is a battle most women have lost. One needs only to look at the writers who, according to the critic,

constitute the Western canon. Among twenty-six writers, only four are women: Jane Austen, Emily Dickinson, George Eliot and Virginia Woolf. In my opinion, these four writers represent nothing more than a concession. Undoubtedly, Bloom's criterion is defined by a male-centered worldview. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, it is not surprising that only one of them is a poet, Emily Dickinson.

No doubt there is gender bias in the perception of what is considered so-called "high literature," as evidenced by the recurrence of women writers almost always being accounted for as exceptions. In Pam Morris's view: "In considering the work of female writers male critics use the same logic to deny, ignore or marginalize women's artistic achievement. Women writers are always regarded as special cases: writing is male, and women are always primarily women and only secondly writers" (43). Morris's argument is that women authors are judged first by their gender and only then, always taking this factor into account, is their work evaluated. In the case of poetry, this criterion seems to be even stricter, since: "More than any other genre, poetry is associated with notions of literature as universal, as the form suited to the lofty treatment of the great and timeless human themes. Women have undoubtedly found it particularly intimidating to claim entry into this elevated discourse" (Morris 79). In other words, since it is often considered a prestigious and elevated genre, usually associated with the so-called "great classics," poetry has had the detrimental potential to become intimidating to women.

The simple act of writing had, and perhaps still has, a different meaning for women, as claimed by Jo Gill: "women who did write – privately or for publication – were subverting all kinds of expectations in so doing" (24). Gill argues that when writing, women could challenge the patriarchal authority. Nevertheless, the critic reminds us that for "women poets, language is arguably always experienced as strange, as alien and as other" (Gill 40). It is as if women, although they have always written, felt that language does not really belong to them. Most

likely, the conflicting relationship between women and language is related to cultural factors.

According to Cora Kaplan:

The difficulty women have in writing seems to me to be linked very closely to the rupture between childhood and adolescence, when, in western societies (and in other cultures as well) public speech is a male privilege and women's speech restricted by custom in mixed sex gatherings, or, if permitted, still characterized by its private nature, an extension of the trivial domestic discourse of women. (55)

Kaplan's view is that since they are relegated to the private sphere, women have trouble developing their ability to express themselves publicly, given that the public sphere has been traditionally reserved for men.

Because of the public nature of literary discourse, women writers have often felt that they are invading a space to which they do not belong. Kaplan states: "A very high proportion of women's poems are about the right to speak and write. The desire to write imaginative poetry and prose was and is a demand for access to and parity within the law and myth-making groups in society" (55). If to the male writer language is seen as an extension of their own being, to the woman writer language is something that needs to be conquered so that women's point of view has its space in literary discourse. The need to address the right to speak and write, acknowledged by Kaplan, can be observed in poems such as the one by Lady Mary Chudleigh's "To the Ladies," written in the eighteenth century: "Like mutes she signs alone must make, / And never any freedom take: / But still be governed by a nod, / And fear her husband as a God: / Him still must serve, him still obey, / And nothing act, and nothing say" (163). The poetic voice regrets the fact that marriage turns women into slaves to their husbands, and this is mainly because she feels they lose their right to speak.

Another eighteenth-century poet, Anne Killigrew, addresses the prerogative to write in “Upon the Saying That My Verses Were Made by Another”: “The envious age, only to me alone, / Will not allow what I do write, my own” (165). The poetic voice's feeling of anger and frustration is palpable. These lines and the title itself show the poet's fear of not being recognized as a true author. The difficulty in obtaining recognition as writers indicates how much, more often than not, women have had to struggle for their space in literary tradition. If women's social and intellectual space has always been limited, what may be said about their literary space? According to Jane Spencer: “It is well known, and has now been the subject of much discussion, that women's writing has a very much smaller space in literary history than men's” (1). The critic reminds us that, as in other spaces, women's access to literature was also hindered.

The issue of space has always been problematic for women. Men traditionally occupied the public space, while the private, specifically the domestic one, was destined to women, which, according to the British feminist geographer Doreen Massey, was related to an attempt of social control: “The attempt to confine women to the domestic sphere was both a specifically spatial control and, through that, a social control on identity” (179). Massey argues that by restricting the physical space of women, it was also possible to restrict their social role, since women would not be able to see themselves as participants in the public sphere. Besides, the clear separation of spaces occupied by women and men contributed, and still does, to the social construction of gender, as stated by Alison Blunt and Gillian Rose. They argue: “The social construction of gender difference establishes some spaces as women's and others as men's; those meanings then serve to reconstitute the power relations of gendered identity” (3). Blunt and Rose believe that by creating exclusive spaces for men and women, gender differences are strengthened and therefore privileges related to one or the other can be maintained.

This distinction of space based on gender also leads to differences in relation to the value added to each space, as stated by Daphne Spain: “Masculine spaces (such as nineteenth-century American colleges) contain socially valued knowledge of theology, law, and medicine, while feminine spaces (such as the home) contain devalued knowledge of child care, cooking and cleaning” (10-11). For Spain, women have historically been removed from the knowledge production spaces and confined to a single space, the domestic one, where they could not grow intellectually. If women become forced to live an intellectually limited life, women's writing is compromised as well.

Spencer acknowledges two reasons for the constraint of women's space in literature: first, “the history of women’s relatively low access to all the advantages that writers need, beginning at a basic level with literacy itself; and second, the masculinist biases, conscious and unconscious, of our records of literary activity” (1). Spencer observes that women have always been in disadvantage. As argued before, a poor education combined with a man-centered literary history contributed to the oblivion of women's tradition. It is noteworthy how all these arguments dialogue with Virginia Woolf’s reflections discussed in 1929 in *A Room of One's Own*. Although she did not make a historical account, her sensitivity allowed her to realize several factors that distinguished women's and men's work which are still debated nowadays. For example, she realized the gulf that existed between the two sexes regarding social and economic conditions: “Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor? What effect has poverty on fiction? What conditions are necessary for the creation of works of art?” (579). Woolf insists that as long as women live in poor conditions, they will never have the necessary requirements to compete on equal terms with men.

So why would this renowned feminist writer be criticized by feminists themselves? For one thing, it is possible that her ideas were later judged out of its historical context. In the 1920s, Woolf certainly did not have the same amount of information about women writers

from the past that are available now. In fact, as mentioned before, if women's literary history and tradition is being gradually restored, this is much due to *A Room of One's Own*. In *Sexual/Textual Politics*, Toril Moi appropriately analyzes what she considers to be “some negative feminist responses to Woolf” (1). Her main criticism is addressed to what she sees as Elaine Showalter's misreading of the English writer. Moi argues that “Woolf’s essays fail to transmit any direct experience to the reader, according to Showalter, largely because as an upper-class woman Woolf lacked the necessary negative experience to qualify as a good feminist writer” (4). Moi criticizes the fact that for Showalter an author’s private life and social class defines whatever she may write about or not.

The critic continues her scrutiny of Showalter's ideas and she maintains that: “Showalter’s position ... in fact strongly favours the form of writing commonly known as critical or bourgeois realism, precluding any real recognition of the value of Virginia Woolf’s modernism” (4). Moi’s belief is that if Showalter bases her argument on a nineteenth-century literary movement, how will she be able to recognize Woolf's modernist style? I agree with Moi's view that Showalter's argument does not hold. In a twentieth-century context no critic can still believe that the author's personal life should be taken into account in the appraisal of a literary work. Another point that Moi considers problematic in Showalter's criticism is her view of the treatment given by Woolf to androgyny. She claims that: “Showalter sees Woolf’s insistence in the androgynous nature of the great writer as a flight away from a ‘troubled feminism’ (282) and locates the moment of this flight in *Room*” (2). For Moi, Showalter sees Woolf's defense of androgyny as a negative characteristic instead of recognizing this concept as what it really means for the English writer: the means to expose the fragility of gender constructions.

This reading seems to be clear to Moi when she writes:

This is not, as Showalter argues, a flight from fixed gender identities, but a recognition of their falsifying metaphysical nature. Far from fleeing such gender identities because she fears them, Woolf rejects them because she has seen them for what they are. She has understood that the goal of the feminist struggle must precisely be to deconstruct the death-dealing binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity. (13)

The critic asserts that Woolf's position on gender issues was ahead of her time. In my view the English writer understands that gender constructions had fragile bases that might be questioned. Certainly Woolf's value for feminist criticism needs to be properly recognized, as emphasized by Moi: "A feminist criticism that would do both justice and homage to its great mother and sister: this, surely, should be our goal" (18). I think Moi is right in her defense of Woolf since her contribution is undeniable. Her work in *A Room of One's Own* certainly led the way to the recovery of women's history and tradition in literature. Woolf's influence can be measured by Gilbert and Gubar's statement in the preface of the second edition of *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*: "To be sure, despite (or perhaps because of) its enlarged parameters, this revised edition ... continues to remind readers of Woolf's affirmation that 'books continue each other'" (xxix). Even with the 11-year interval between the two editions, 1985 and 1996, Woolf's words still guide the anthology.

In *The Norton Anthology*, Gilbert and Gubar explain that their organization criterion is not based on the usual literary movements and periods: "We have continued to organize these diverse writings chronologically, for we still believe that, though conventional literary periodization does not suit women's aesthetic past, the history of women's literary tradition does have significant phases of its own" (xxxix). The critics make a distinction between history and literary history, since the latter could not do justice to the particularities of women's tradition. This means that literary periods, as well as the canon, are most often based on

literature produced by men. Joyce Warren agrees with this line of argument when she writes: “Originally created by a critical establishment that was male-dominated for a predominantly white male literary tradition and sanctioned by a chronological inevitability, such literary periods have always been fictions, but fictions with the tenacity of convenience and convention” (ix). In fact, as Warren points out, literary classification based on periods such as romanticism, realism, among others, was created to meet the needs of an exclusively masculine tradition that supposedly follows some tenets.

The option for a chronological classification based on historical periods in *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* may not be the ideal one, but it allows the reader to see how the literature produced by women changed over time. This seems to be a better option to locate women writers than conventional periodization for it avoids the sort of problem acknowledged by Warren:

Typically, women writers are simply wedged into established literary periods that hardly suit them. For example, Emily Dickinson is sometimes located in the so-called American Renaissance, a category of all-male writers that was created by F. O. Matthiessen in the 1940s for his own and the nation’s purposes and that, although frequently challenged, still dominates studies of nineteenth-century American literature. Only by being considered a disciple of the much lesser poet Ralph Waldo Emerson can Dickinson be added to this literary period, and even then she is out of place. (ix)

For Warren, it does not seem right that Emily Dickinson is considered as part of a literary period that was not intended to include women. In my view, since standard periodization is part of a tradition that has excluded women for so many years, such periodization needs to be revised.

Certainly, one cannot expect that an ambitious work such as *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* will not receive its amount of criticism. Margaret Ezell, for instance, questions the treatment given by Gilbert and Gubar to writers before 1800. In her book, *Writing Women's Literary History*, Ezell maintains that, although Gilbert and Gubar's anthology is "a true landmark on the path to establishing women's studies as part of a standard university-curriculum" (41), it is frustrating for "both feminist literary historians and literary critics working in the pre-Romantic periods to discover that 'the tradition in English' of women's literature before 1800 occupies only 172 pages out of 2,390" (41). For Ezell, Gilbert and Gubar give little space to early women writers and this may compromise the studies on literature produced by women because of the importance of their anthology. It is important to mention that Ezell refers specifically to the first edition of *The Norton Anthology*.

In the second edition, Gilbert and Gubar made some changes as, for example, in the subtitle. They consider it "the most significant change within the anthology: whereas the book was originally subtitled 'The Tradition in English', we now subtitle it 'The Traditions in English' (xxiv). Besides that, the number of pages devoted to literature produced before the nineteenth century, one of Ezell's criticisms of the anthology, increased to 281 pages.

Another point that Ezell considers problematic is the fact that Gilbert and Gubar are guided by Virginia Woolf's work in *A Room of One's Own*. Their emphasis on the nineteenth century, in which, according to the authors, women writers "created what was in some sense a golden age of the female imagination" (Gilbert and Gubar 303), is probably based on Woolf's view that "towards the end of the eighteenth century a change came about which, if I were rewriting history, I should describe more fully and think of greater importance than the Crusades or the Wars of the Roses. The middle-class woman began to write" (603). Woolf emphasizes the importance of the change of profile of women writers, who did not belong

only to the upper classes anymore. The significance Woolf gives to this fact is certainly related to her belief that, “Money dignifies what is frivolous if unpaid for” (603), as I have been discussing here. For Woolf, being a professional writer, someone who could publish and make money with writing, was something fundamental for the financial and intellectual independence of women, as it is the case of Aphra Behn.

According to Ezell, the problem in following Woolf’s view without questioning it is that:

This assumption of the supremacy and desirability of print is ironic in the context of the literary history of early women writers. Coterie literature is devalued as the “leisure” pastime of aristocratic ladies, or a disguised means to break into serious literature, but this is only true when an alternative literary environment is well established. Before the eighteenth century, coterie literature was the most common form of literary exchange. (37)

Ezell argues that one cannot judge literature produced at other times using modern parameters. She uses the term “coterie literature” to refer to a system of manuscript circulation, which, according to the author is “social and noncompetitive in nature; works circulate in manuscript inviting additions and corrections, with no need for the author to establish ownership or copyright” (Ezell 38). Consequently, publishing was not seen as something essential, whether for women or men writers. Thus, the concept of a professional writer is not something that can be applied to the past without reservations. Ezell also points out that: “Because of our concept of the literary environment as a nineteenth-century competitive, commercial one, we have overlooked or excluded a literary world before 1700, one in which men and women participated together” (38). She insists that our assessment of literary history remained influenced by a Victorian view of the past. I agree that this is a problematic issue because with publication as a criterion to consider something as literature,

many women writers remain forgotten even when women's tradition was somehow consolidated in the past.

In analyzing Woolf's influence in the construction of women's literary history, Ezell does not fail to consider the context in which she wrote *A Room of One's Own*:

She [Woolf] is a great novelist, an inspired analyst of the process of literary creation – but she is not a great historian, and it is unfair to demand that she act in such a role. She was bound by the limitations of the historiography of her day. We, on the other hand, have taken a text designed to be provocative and to stimulate further research into women's lives in the past and canonized it as history. (49-50)

Ezell's criticism is not directed toward the English writer, but to the use which has been made of her work. Woolf's essay is not a historical treatise and should not be treated as such. However, I believe that using Woolf's work in a critical manner, as a literary reference on the subject, is something positive. After all, this is a pioneering text, which can be considered as one of the first modern texts to take a feminist look at literature.

It is important to highlight the influence of the nineteenth century ideology in the construction of our view of early women writers, as acknowledged by Ezell: "Part of the decline of the Renaissance and Restoration female authors arises from the Victorian's low esteem for the eras in which they lived" (92). In other words, the process of silencing women writers has its origins in Victorian morality, which was considerably different from previous centuries, especially regarding women. Patmore's idealized woman, *The Angel in the House*, as mentioned, was the model to be followed. Therefore, in relation to an ideology of domesticity, Ezell claims that: "Very few of the women celebrated by the early anthologists and encyclopedists emerge unscathed by the steely glance of the Victorian watchdogs of feminine delicacy" (92-93). For her, the private life of women writers came to be seen as a

determining factor in evaluating their works. To be considered a good writer, a woman would have to be, first of all, a good mother and wife.

In view of this, women writers who had been popular in the past were gradually erased from literary history because they would not fit the Victorian model of feminine virtue. Ezell observes that: “while Aphra Behn becomes repugnant because of her unwomanly wit and licentious content, presumptuous Margaret Cavendish, like Katherine Philips, is saved by her domestic virtues and sweet ‘girliness’” (101). Once more, the example of Behn illustrates how women's writing was progressively undervalued on behalf of a gender ideology that preached feminine inequality and women's inferiority. As a result, Ezell reminds us that: “Not only were the numbers of editions of early women writers minuscule by the end of the [nineteenth] century, but also the number and length of their entries in the anthologies were progressively eroded” (104-105). Victorian moral determined the fate of the work of many early women writers, which was in most cases, oblivion.

Consequently, Woolf found it difficult to get information about her predecessors in the 1920s. She had to create the character Judith Shakespeare in order to fill a historical gap: “For it is a perennial puzzle why no woman wrote a word of that extraordinary literature when every other man, it seemed, was capable of song or sonnet” (Woolf 589). She urges us to reflect on the matter. With all the limitations of her time, she used her imagination to try to solve this seeming enigma. What she could not know was that there was a literary tradition produced by women to which, however, one had no more access, given the privilege of a so-called “universal” tradition.

Even so, one cannot deny the importance of Woolf's text in leading the way for feminist scholars such as Gilbert and Gubar, who helped to consolidate the work of women writers from the past. Despite the shortcomings pointed out by Ezell, *The Norton Anthology* plays an important role in bringing together women writers from all periods. Certainly, Ezell's

argument in relation to early women writers is a valid one. However, I do not believe that the smaller space of these writers in Gilbert and Gubar's anthology invalidates their work. After all, it is only the beginning of the redemption of a fragmented tradition. There is still much to be researched so that women's tradition can be equally valued as that of men's.

According to Jane Dowson and Alice Entwistle, the "burgeoning number of women poets in the last two decades of the twentieth century is certainly remarkable. By the year 2000, we see women penetrate the glass ceiling of literary authority" (169). Undoubtedly, within the context of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, women's writing has gained in recognition and prestige. However, in the epigraphs that open this chapter, it is possible to notice a sense of dissatisfaction regarding tradition. Although belonging to different generations, the four women poets – Anne Finch, Amy Lowell, Eavan Boland and Carol Ann Duffy – seem to have in common the desire to belong to a tradition; a tradition in which they are respected and in which they can learn from each other.

Authors of the second half of the twentieth century, Boland and Duffy, each in their own way, seek to consolidate this tradition. They write poetry that defies the canon, while questioning the construction of a tradition that has excluded women. Boland's *Outside History*, first published in 1990, also highlights women's perspective. She contests the Irish tradition of feminine myths by using common women as speakers. In *The World's Wife*, first published in 1999, Duffy appropriates traditional characters from European literature by making her speakers discuss the same tradition that created them. The woman's point of view of famous stories is highlighted and Western tradition is challenged. By doing so, both authors help to build and consolidate women's literary tradition.

CHAPTER TWO:

Eavan Boland: A Poet of Small Things

There is no other way:

myth is the wound we leave

in the time we have –

Eavan Boland, "The Making of an Irish Goddess"

Eavan Boland, given the quality of her work, is regarded as one of the foremost writers of Ireland. One noticeable hallmark of her poetry is undoubtedly the predominance of a woman's perspective, often analyzed by critics as being a feminist point of view. By means of this standpoint, Boland gives special attention to the private and domestic spaces inhabited by women throughout history, taking into account that the private is also political, as feminist critics such as Carol Hanisch, Joan Kelly and Judith Butler among others, have been debating since the emergence of the second wave of the feminist movement.

Another evident characteristic of her poetry is her treatment of myths. R.T. Smith believes that "Eavan Boland has for a decade brought to light the nature of the myths that women have been relegated to" (96). Boland is a critic of myths, especially feminine myths, often present in literature in general and particularly in works by men. She is fully aware of the negative effect of these myths on women writers and feminine mythical images in the Irish poetic tradition are of special interest to Boland. In her pamphlet *A Kind of Scar*, she complains that: "The majority of Irish male poets depended on women as motifs in their poetry ... The women in their poems were often passive, decorative, raised to emblematic status" (80). For Boland, in the Irish literary – and masculine – tradition, women have always been treated as objects. For that matter, her poetry aims at contesting this tradition by questioning and deconstructing these myths.

Something that stands out in Irish literary tradition is the frequent identification of women with the land or with the nation. According to Declan Kiberd, “one of the most ancient and, in the event, subversive conceits in bardic tradition was the notion that the land was a woman, to be worshipped, wooed, and won, if necessary by death” (235) In this case, land and women are seen as spoils that belong to those who manage to impose themselves upon them often through violence. Probably, this identification of women with the land is related to the Irish colonial past. In the colonial context, a woman was often considered just one of the many riches the colonizer appropriated. In *Cartografias Contemporâneas*, Sandra Goulart Almeida maintains that since the colonization of America and other continents, the perception of the land was related to the image of a woman that was supposed to be tamed and conquered by the Europeans (96). The representation of the colonial territory as a woman is also acknowledged by Ania Loomba:

The long pictorial tradition in which the four continents were represented as women now generated images of America or Africa that positioned these continents as available for plunder, possession, discovery and conquest. Conversely, native women and their bodies are described in terms of the promise and the fear of the colonial land. (151)

It is clear that there is a strong sexual connotation in this association of the feminine image with the colony. In the European imaginary, the experience of conquering a territory resembles that of taking possession of a woman.

Furthermore, Loomba believes that “from the beginning of the colonial period till its end (and beyond), female bodies symbolise the conquered land. This metaphoric use of the female body varies in accordance with the exigencies and histories of particular colonial situations” (152). In other words, throughout the history of colonization the woman and her

body were often used to signify the European appropriation of foreign lands. Moreover, it is not a static symbolism; it could change considering the context of each time and place.

It is interesting then to refer to John Donne's poem, "To his Mistress Going to Bed," posthumously published between 1654 and 1669. The poetic voice describes the American continent as a woman: "O my America! my new-found-land, / My kingdome, safeliest when with one man man'd, / My Myne of precious stones, My Emperie, / How blest I am in this discovering thee!" (158-159). The poetic voice compares the woman with a continent and celebrates the "discovery" of America. He humanizes the continent by addressing it as a woman. Ironically, the woman figure in turn is dehumanized when used as a surrogate for land.

Almeida quotes John Donne's poem as an example of the image of America as a woman, along with Johannes Stradanus's image of Amerigo Vespucci "discovering" America, which is represented by a nude native woman. She claims that both representations are part of a founding narrative in which the female body becomes an emblem of the conquest of America. Moreover, the idea of the colony as a woman helps to establish the colonizer's superiority in terms of gender and civilization (97). Given the examples, and others such as H. Rider Haggard's *She* and Luís de Camões's *The Lusiads*, one can say that many literary works were compliant with the ideology of colonization and its objectification of women.

I believe that colonial history has placed the woman writer in a complex situation because this is the model she finds in Western literary tradition; a model in which she is an object, a symbol, who therefore does not speak for herself. Thus, as mentioned in the first chapter, Adrienne Rich calls for a re-vision of this tradition, which is followed by many women writers, including Boland. Rich states: "We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us" (11-12). For Rich, the literary cycle, in which men are active subjects and women are

passive objects, needs to be interrupted. For this to happen, it is important that tradition and the canon are revised so that women writers are not intimidated by what was written in the past and defined as the tradition. Surely, Boland follows Rich's revisionist concept, as pointed out by Victor Luftig: "That Rich has been an important influence on Boland hardly requires proof. The younger poet (by a half generation) has registered that influence either explicitly or implicitly on a number of occasions" (59). These two important poets share the same beliefs, especially regarding women's writing.

In *A Kind of Scar*, Boland writes that like "the swimmer in Adrienne Rich's poem, 'Diving into the Wreck,' I needed to find out 'the damage that was done and the treasures that prevail'" (87). Both poets address the myths to which women are often associated. In "Diving into the Wreck," by Rich, the poetic voice claims that there is "a book of myths / in which / our names do not appear (279), while in Boland's "Outside History," the speaker claims: "I have chosen: / out of myth into history I move to be / part of that ordeal" (45). Both poetic voices acknowledge the power, but also reject the myths of Western literature. Rich and Boland realize the pernicious influence of these myths on women. Concerning Irish poetic history, Boland argues that: "The idea of the defeated nation being reborn as a triumphant woman was central to a certain kind of Irish poem. Dark Rosaleen. Cathleen Ni Houlihan. The nation as woman; the woman as national muse" (81). Irish culture is replete with stories of feminine myths that celebrate imaginary women.

Barbara O'Connor also observes that:

Idealized women have long played a central role in the Irish cultural imagination. Visual representations of allegorical and mythical female figures such as Queen Maeve, Mother Ireland, the Virgin Mary, and Hibernia have, along with their more anonymous sisters, colleens, and comely maidens, been presented as role models of Irish femininity. (144)

The use of emblematic feminine characters has been pervasive in Irish history, not only as metaphors for the nation, as Boland insists, but also as perfect examples of how Irish women should behave, as O'Connor emphasizes. Regarding the "colleen," mentioned in the quote above, O'Connor states that the most known reference to this figure relates back to *The Colleen Bawn*, a melodramatic play first performed in 1860, and written by the Irish playwright Dion Boucicault. The play was inspired by the novel of Gerald Griffin, *The Collegians*, published in 1829, which was based on a true story about the murder of a 15-year-old girl, Ellen Hanley, by her husband. *The Colleen Bawn*, whose title derives from the Irish *cailín bán* that can be translated as "fair girl," is Eily O'Connor, a peasant girl who is secretly married to a noble gentleman, Hardress Cregan. However, unlike the real story, in the play the couple has a happy ending. Based on his own play, Boucicault, along with John Oxenford, wrote a libretto for an opera by Julius Benedict, *The Lily of Killarney*. In addition, the play was also adapted to films.

Other female figures inhabit the Irish collective imaginary, such as the tragic figure of Deirdre. In Irish mythology, when Deirdre is born a prophecy foretells that she will grow up to be a beautiful woman but she would also be the cause of many wars. Despite that, the King of Ulster decides to marry her in the future. However, Deirdre falls in love with Naoise and they flee the country. The King pretends to forgive the couple and when they return he commands the killing of Naoise. Then, Deirdre is forced to marry the King and also to live half of the year with the man who killed Naoise. Deirdre then commits suicide. Her story inspired plays and books, such as John Millington Synge's *Deirdre of the Sorrows* and James Stephens's *Deirdre*.

Another character of Irish mythology that is frequently evoked in literary works is Queen Maeve or Medb. She is mostly known from the Irish epic tale *Táin Bó Cúailnge* and for her beauty, independence and aggressive sexuality. Maeve has also been the subject of

Yeats's poem "The Old Age of Queen Maeve." The figure of Dark Rosaleen is famous because of James Clarence Mangan's poem "Dark Rosaleen," written in the first half of the nineteenth century. According to William Dumbleton, "Rosaleen personifies Ireland in the same way Uncle Sam stands for the United States or John Bull for England" (15). In the poem, Mangan romanticizes the image of a woman: "O my dark Rosaleen, / Do not sigh, do not weep! / The priests are on the ocean green; / They march along the deep. / There's wine from the royal Pope / Upon the ocean green; / And Spanish ale shall give you hope, / My dark Rosaleen!" (107). Similar to John Donne's poem, the woman is here compared to the nation. In this context, a woman writer or poet, as Boland, faces considerable problems to identify herself with such culture.

What would then be Boland's place in Irish literary tradition? In her own words: "I was a woman and a poet in a culture which had the greatest difficulty associating the two ideas" (79). Boland acknowledges, as mentioned before, that in Ireland, women were themes and not subjects. However, this does not mean that she embraces the tradition as it is. According to Heather Clark:

Boland has sought to revise this tradition, and make room for those women whose voices have been silenced over time – women who died of fever in a maternity ward, prostitutes who worked at the British garrisons, young emigrants bound for a life of domestic service in Boston and New York, and finally, the postwar suburban mother who stands in her garden at dusk and calls her daughter home. These are the figures, Boland insists, who have always existed "outside history," and whose absence she seeks to atone for and redress. (328)

Boland's strategy of re-vision is to put in a prominent place female poetic voices that question traditional figures of Western poetry. Consciously, Boland chooses to turn everydayness into poetic trope.

One of her books in which she addresses everyday life from women's perspective is *Outside History*. In this work, it is possible to recognize the importance given by Boland to the private and domestic spaces inhabited by women throughout history. Divided into three sections, "Object Lessons," "Outside History: a sequence" and "Distances," this book represents what can be considered Boland's engagement with the history of small things, but of great emotional values. The poems are written from the common woman's perspective, and through this view there is a reinterpretation of historical and literary figures.

2.1 - Womanhood or Private Stories

A noticeable hallmark of Boland's poetry is her ability to communicate women's experiences. She problematizes womanhood and unveils all the complexity of ordinariness. Marriage, motherhood, domesticity, all this can be part of the life of an ordinary woman. In "The Shadow Doll" Boland's speaker expresses her impressions about a Victorian doll, which, according to the epigraph that opens the poem, "*was sent to the bride-to-be in Victorian times, by her dressmaker*" (17). The poetic voice begins to describe the details of the doll's dress: "They stitched blooms from ivory tulle / to hem the oyster gleam of the veil. / They made hoops for the crinoline" (Boland 17). The bride's passivity, represented by the doll figure, is emphasized by the third person pronoun "They stitched," "They made." Who are they? On a literal interpretation, one can infer that "they" are the dressmakers. Nevertheless, a careful reading reveals that "they" stand for those who control the situation. Perhaps, "they" are those who have the power to control not just the bride's dress, but the bride herself and women in general, especially in the context of Victorian society.

The poetic voice's description continues: "Now, in summary and neatly sewn – / a porcelain bride in an airless glamour – / the shadow doll survives its occasion" (Boland 17). The doll's lifeless beauty becomes a symbol of passivity in her "airless glamour;" the same passivity observed in many feminine literary myths. The doll immortalizes a fleeting moment and embodies, as well as the myths, the image of the idealized woman; a figurehead carved only to meet society's expectations. This figure remains: "Under glass, under wraps, it stays / even now, after all, discreet about / visits, fevers, quickenings and lusts" (Boland 17). Perhaps, the doll has been a witness of some extramarital affair, "visits," "fevers," and maybe also a pregnancy (as evoked by the word "quickenings") - the result of a woman's sexual desire and "lusts." But the doll cannot talk and it is trapped; likewise, the wife is also trapped, not by glass, but by marriage itself.

Since the shadow doll was a Victorian custom, according to Boland's epigraph, she refers to marriage at that time. According to Sally Mitchell, when it comes to Victorian marriage: "A woman's civil status was dramatically altered when she married ... Once married, a woman had no independent legal existence. Everything she owned or inherited or earned was her husband's; she had no right even to spend her own income for her own needs" (103). This means that the Victorian wife was often just one of her husband's properties. Under these conditions, it would be expected that many women felt trapped by marriage. Although woman's legal status has advanced since the nineteenth century, Boland's speaker feels connected to the misfortunes of her foremothers: "she could see herself / inside it all, holding less than real / stephanotis, rose petals, never feeling / satin rise and fall with the vows / I kept repeating on the night before – / astray among the cards and wedding gifts" (17). The past bride, "she," feels like the doll. She feels the artificiality of the wedding ceremony, represented by the "stephanotis" and "rose petals." The present bride, "I," enters

the poem for the first time later in the poem and she continues the story. Past and present bride merge into one.

The poetic voice feels like she is not much different from the lifeless doll. She is also part of a ritual in which her individuality is not taken into consideration. It is almost as if she was saying goodbye to the person she had been until then. The last lines of the poem leave the reader somewhat anxious about the poetic voice's future: "pressing down, then / pressing down again. And then, locks" (Boland 17). In my view, this ending represents what happens after the wedding. Possibly, the woman will be "locked" in marriage, in her role as a wife and all that it represents. Boland's view is very different from romantic and idealized stories in which marriage comes at the end as a prize and a promise of eternal happiness. In "The Shadow Doll" the poetic voice seems aware that there are no such things as "happy endings."

In Boland's poetry, there is neither happiness nor unhappiness after the wedding. What there is, in fact, is the daily routine and domesticity. Inside a home, even the smallest things can be poetic themes. For instance, in "Object Lessons" the scene painted on a mug is described in all its details: "A hunting scene: / Dogs. Hawking. Silk. / Linen spread out in a meadow. / Pitchers of wine clouding in the shadow / of beech trees. / Buttermilk. / A huntsman" (Boland 13). These details represent an idealized view of the past, a time when people allegedly had more contact with nature. In her modern life, the poetic voice finds beauty in a small domestic object; perhaps because the mug symbolizes a change in a couple's life: "Together, we unpacked it / in the new house" (Boland 13). For now, it is just a "house;" the couple knows that it still needs to be turned into a home.

However, what stands out in the poem is the contrast between a romanticized past and a deglamorized present. The scene depicted in the mug seems far away from the speaker's reality: "A wild rabbit. / A thrush ready to sing. / A lady smiling as the huntsman kissed her: / the way land looks before disaster / strikes or suffering / becomes a habit / was not a feature /

of the history we knew” (Boland 13). The poetic voice is aware of how fragile the idyllic scene of the mug is, “the way land looks before disaster;” such artificial tranquility cannot stand up in the face of reality, “of the history we knew.” The banal routine of home is highlighted: “those mornings / we drank coffee / and shared cake in a kitchen full of / chaos, before we knew the details of / this pastoral were merely / veiled warnings” (Boland 13). The escape of the idyllic scene is temporarily forgotten, as evoked by the word “chaos.” Moreover, the poetic voice acknowledges that the scene in the mug is a “pastoral” whose “details” are like “warnings” that something is about to happen.

While domestic details become significant, the pastoral's fragility is confirmed: “we found the broken pieces of / the sparrow hawk and the kisses of / the huntsman, the pitcher / and the thrush’s never / to-be-finished / aria” (Boland 14). What was about to happen is the sight of the beautiful idealized scene destroyed ironically by a mere floor: “you and I had sworn / to sand down and seal / with varnish” (Boland 14). I believe "Object Lessons" is chiefly Boland's response to pastoral tradition in its depiction of a poeticized rural scene, which is the main characteristic of pastoral poetry, literally annihilated by the contemporary urban scene of the poem. If we consider that: “The pastoral tradition has long had a unique place in Ireland” (Potts 3), it is only natural to think that a revisionist poet like Boland would react to it. According to John Bugg, the “term ‘pastoral’ itself is drawn from the Latin *pastor*, for “shepherd,” and quite literally means depictions of the lives of shepherds” (160). The origin of the term refers to the life in the countryside and the proximity of the human being with nature. Pastoral poetry dates back to the ancient Greece and Rome, according to Rhian Williams:

Traditionally, pastoral poetry is associated to the Classical world (it began with Theocritus’s *Idylls*) and was importantly developed by Virgil in his *Eclogues*; even when written centuries later it tends to refer to Classical figures and

settings. Originally pastoral poetry entertained sophisticated courtly audiences with tales of rural simplicity, and presented potentially rather twee scenes of shepherds ... usually at rest from their labours (often reclining beneath a tree) speaking in unrealistic elaborate and arcane language about their work, their landscape and their loves. The tradition rests on recognizing such a scene as ideally harmonious and full of simple pleasure, in contrast to the faraway corruption of urban space. (54)

The pastoral poetic tradition relates to the idea of the country life as a paradise on earth. Somehow, the pastoral poem can be seen as a refuge from a cynical and harsh reality. Presumably because of its escapist potential, the pastoral genre has been used by poets of different times, from Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," written in the sixteenth century, to "Shoeing the Currach" by the Irish poet Mary O'Malley, published in 1997, as acknowledged by Mark Strand and Eavan Boland in *The Making of a Poem*.

In Ireland, the influence of the pastoral tradition relates back to its colonial past, as argued by Donna Potts: "Irish writers from Goldsmith to Heaney have relied on the traditional association of Ireland with the countryside and England with the city to offer a critique of the impact of British colonization on the land" (101). Therefore, one can understand the Irish pastoral tradition also as a form of resistance to colonial oppression.

However, for an Irish woman poet, as Boland, the need to resist is even more urgent considering that, as Potts points out: "Boland's sense of dispossession arises not merely from her status as an Irish writer but also from her status as a woman, dispossessed by patriarchal structures" (101). In such circumstances a woman is doubly oppressed by both colonization and gender bias. Thus, Boland reinterprets the traditional pastoral scene in "Object Lessons" and the contemporary domestic scene takes its place. In Boland's poem, pastoral imagery is nothing but a simple painting in a mug, a small domestic object as fragile as the supposed

uncorrupted world of the pastoral poem. Somehow, the broken pieces of the mug denote the necessity of rupture with the idealization of the pastoral and a consequent reinvention of such genre.

In “We Were Neutral in the War” Boland contrasts a housewife's perspective with her husband's. The poetic voice describes her typical routine broken only by his concern: “Your husband frowns at dinner, has no time / for the baby who has learned to crease three / fingers and wave ‘day-day’. This is serious, / he says. This could be what we all feared” (Boland 23). Boland’s second-person speaker, “your husband,” brings the reader closer to that home environment. Involved, the reader readily identifies with the housewife. Thus, one is led to question what it is, in fact, “serious.” For the poetic voice, what happens inside a home is noteworthy: “You pierce a sequin with a needle. / You slide it down single-knotted thread / until it lies with all the others in / a puzzle of brightness. / Then another and another one” (23). Despite her husband's concern with the outside world, the wife remains focused on what she considers to be important; her meticulous work of sewing sequins together that creates a “puzzle of brightness” in clothing.

Domestic details are emphasized and what would be a “universal” theme is pushed into the background: “On the breakfast table the headlines are / telling of a city under threat where / you mixed cheese with bitter fennel and / fell in love over demitasse” (Boland 23). The event that the newspapers consider important is about people who want to harm other people, “a city under threat.” Such hatred does not belong “on the breakfast table,” where the housewife carefully prepares her food, which is a source of pleasure for her since she “fell in love over demitasse.” It is important to stress that Boland is not diminishing the impact of a war in any society, considering that the poem’s title makes reference to Irish neutrality during World War II. Since ancient times, war has been a poetic theme, but often from the viewpoint of men. Simon Featherstone claims that: “War poetry has been more exclusively masculine in

its composition and outlook than any other comparable kind of writing” (95). For Featherstone, this is a poetic genre which, historically, has ostracized women's perspective.

Boland's poem tries to rescue what was kept concealed inside each Irish home during World War II, which was women's history. Perhaps the poem's title refers not only to Ireland's policy at the time, but also to a prevalent supposed neutrality of women when it comes to war. What I mean is that, usually, men are the main actors of armed conflicts. Even in the current context, women who fight in wars can be considered exceptions. Hence, it is possible that the title, “We Were Neutral in the War,” is deliberately ironic, considering that “we” is supposed to represent the entire population of Ireland, but historically men have been, in the majority of cases, the ones to make decisions about peace, war or neutrality.

Undoubtedly, for a woman, the experience of war is different. Boland then leads the reader to see the war, a theme often associated with masculinity, through the eyes of a mother and wife: “The night he comes to tell you this is war / you wait for him to put on his dinner jacket. / The party is tonight. / The streets are quiet. / Dublin is at peace” (24). For her, what really matters is the present time, “tonight.” The world may be at war, but this woman's world, “Dublin,” is still peaceful. At least for the time being, she wants to enjoy the small pleasures of an ordinary life: “The talk is of death but you take / the hand of the first man who asks you” (Boland 24). This ordinary woman chooses to celebrate the present, since she is reminded by the “talk of death” of how ephemeral life is.

Boland's depiction of womanhood is opposed to that which she criticizes in Irish tradition: “a fusion of the national and the feminine which seemed to simplify both” (76). As mentioned before, many feminine myths embody this tradition, such as that of Mother Ireland. In Heather Ingman's view, “Women were to be passive embodiments of Irish virtue; men were Mother Ireland's sons who were to sacrifice their lives for her” (7). This figure has limited the lives of Irish men and women by predetermining gender roles. In “We Were

Neutral in the War,” for instance, Boland reacts to the mythic image of Mother Ireland depicting her poetic voice as a mother who is not a symbol, but an ordinary human being who takes care of her house and her family in the best possible way.

Another example of an ordinary mother who opposes the image of Mother Ireland is the poetic voice of “Hanging Curtains with an Abstract Pattern in a Child’s Room,” in which the title could not be more mundane. The poetic voice performs a task that, banal as it may be, has a special meaning for her: “I chose these for you – / not the precinct of the unicorn, nor / the half-torn / singlet of a nursery rhyme prince, but / the signals of enigma: / Ellipse. Triangle. A music of ratio” (Boland 58). She decides not to use what would be a traditional childlike decoration, “unicorn” or “nursery rhyme prince.” Instead, she chooses to stimulate her child's mind with geometric shapes which are “the signals of enigma.” Probably the child is a girl whose mother does not want her to be influenced by fairy tales and nursery rhymes. That would be understandable considering that these narratives usually underestimate women. In *Psychology of Gender*, Vicki Helgeson maintains that: “Nursery rhymes depict females as quiet and sweet, maids, crying, and running away from spiders, whereas males are shown as kings, thieves, butchers, and adventurers” (190). In other words, these traditional stories construct well-defined gender roles for both men and women. In this binary opposition women are fragile and decorative objects, while men are subjects of their own stories.

Boland’s speaker offers an alternative to her daughter: “Draw these lines / against a winter dusk. / Let them stand in for / frost on the spider’s web and on / bicycle sheds” (58). For the mother, her daughter can and should move beyond any stereotype. The abstract pattern gives her the possibility to build her own reality, to “draw these lines” whenever she looks through the curtains. Yet this mother is not an uncommon being. On the contrary, she could not be more common and she is aware of that:

I hang their weather in

your room, all the time wondering

just how I look from the road –

my blouse off-white and

my skirt the colour of

all the disappointments of a day when

the curtains are pulled back on

a dull morning. (Boland 58-59)

The poetic voice does not glamorize motherhood. Her clothing is an expression of her state of mind after doing household chores; she feels “off-white,” almost invisible, but not enough to hide “all the disappointments of a day.” She knows that is how she looks “from the road” and it is also how she feels; weary and “colorless” by the demands of motherhood. After all, she is not a symbol, a fantasy, a goddess; she is just a woman trying to be a mother.

In these poems, one can begin to understand Boland’s idea of womanhood. For the poet, being a woman may involve her duties as a mother and a wife, but certainly those roles do not define her. These poetic voices are more than that: they also get involved and suffer because of what happens in the outside world. They are, above all, complex people who are able to perceive the beauty that exists even in the simplicity of daily routine.

2.2 - Sisterhood or Shared Stories

Boland communicates not only women's individual experiences, but also the relationship between them. The concept of sisterhood is important to feminist theory. Astrid Henry reminds us that: “Slogans such as ‘Sisterhood is Powerful’, the ubiquitous catchphrase

of the late 1960s and early 1970s, stressed a common sisterhood based on the shared oppression of all women” (391). Of course, as we know today, women are not equal and, therefore, oppression is not felt in the same way by all women. However, this does not mean that the idea of solidarity between women should be disregarded. As the US feminist writer and theorist bell hooks puts it: “Abandoning the idea of Sisterhood as an expression of political solidarity weakens and diminishes feminist movement. Solidarity strengthens resistance struggle” (44). For hooks, feminism needs women to be united.

When it comes to literature, connections between women writers are of fundamental importance to consolidate women's literary tradition. One needs only to be reminded of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, mentioned in the previous chapter. Her pioneering work certainly helped women writers to establish a connection with their literary past. Boland's “The Rooms of Other Women Poets” pays homage to Woolf. The poetic voice tries to connect with her foremothers, just as Woolf did: “I wonder about you: whether the blue abrasions / of daylight, falling as dusk across your page, / make you reach for the lamp. I sometimes think / I see that gesture in the way you use language” (Boland 12). Boland creates an interesting image of a woman poet searching for light as a metaphor for the centuries in which women struggled to write, facing all the difficulties discussed in the first chapter. The poetic voice has an imaginary conversation with other women poets of the past in search of this history, a tradition with which she can identify. She finds this tradition in a closed, domestic environment, in which women have inhabited throughout history and in which they produced their work, their knowledge. Therefore, the significance of the private sphere is reconsidered.

In this space, this room, its furniture, no matter how simple, gains importance:

The chair you use, for instance, may be cane
soaked and curled in spirals, painted white

and eloquent, or iron mesh and the table
 a horizon of its own plain, deal trestles,

 bearing up unmarked, steel-cut foolscap,
 a whole quire of it. (Boland 12)

All these objects have a special meaning for a woman poet, as they symbolize a significant achievement: the room vindicated by Woolf so that women could write. Above all, this room becomes a heritage, which is passed on from one woman poet to another. This brings to mind the concept of “herstory,” an alternative word for “history,” which in itself symbolically conveys the prevalence of the masculine voice in historical accounts. According to Devoney Looser: “Second-wave feminist accounts of the 1970s and 1980s viewed history as overwhelmingly ‘his,’ coining the term ‘herstory’ and presenting it as a compensatory feminist practice. Herstory designated women’s place at the center of an alternative narrative of past events” (1). For feminists, this is a way of protesting against the androcentric viewpoint of conventional history and at the same time the term “herstory” emphasizes that “history” belongs mostly to men.

At this, the poetic voice is well aware of the importance of the room: “Somewhere you are writing or have written in / a room you came to as I come to this / room with honeyed corners, the interior sunless, / the windows shut but clear so I can see / the bay windbreak, the laburnum hang fire” (Boland 12). She knows that although women writers have slowly found their way, they still face adversities – “the interior sunless” – but even with “the windows shut” the poet’s mind is capable of finding a way out. This emotional and intellectual bond established by the poetic voice with her foremothers reclaims the history or herstory of women writers who were often disregarded in the construction of the literary canon.

Furthermore, the poetic voice asserts herself as a literary heir of all the unappreciated writers, and of the few ones who had some recognition. She realizes that her history as a poet would be incomplete without the works of Aphra Behn, Anne Finch, Katherine Philips, and so many others who paved the way for her twenty-first-century daughters.

Boland's emblematic poem about the experience of women's writing can also be considered a manifesto in favor of sisterhood. After all, how can women's tradition be strengthened if women are alien to one another? In bell hooks's view:

Male supremacist ideology encourages women to believe we are valueless and obtain value only by relating to or bonding with men. We are taught that our relationships with one another diminish rather than enrich our experience. We are taught that women are "natural" enemies, that solidarity will never exist between us because we cannot, should not, and do not bond with one another. We have learned these lessons well. We must unlearn them if we are to build a sustained feminist movement. We must learn to live and work in solidarity. We must learn the true meaning and value of Sisterhood. (43)

hooks's words uncover a truth that many women cannot or do not want to see: the fact that they are not often encouraged to identify with other women.

In traditional stories, such as fairy tales, the only relationship between women is frequently based on rivalry. When analyzing the tale of Snow White, Gilbert and Gubar suggest that: "women almost inevitably turn against women because the voice of the looking glass sets them against each other" (38). In other words, in Western narratives women are often incapable of empathizing with other women. On the contrary, they constantly compete with each other for male attention. As hooks reminds us, women need to transform female rivalry into female solidarity.

In my view, this is one of Boland's strategies in response to a culture that exhorts women to see one another as enemies. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argues that:

Women feel their solidarity more spontaneously than men; but within this solidarity the transcendence of each does not go out towards the others, for they all face together toward the masculine world, whose values they wish to monopolize each for herself. Their relations are not constructed on their individualities, but immediately experienced in generality; and from this arises at once an element of hostility. (606)

The French writer and philosopher suggests that each woman experiences conflicting feelings towards other women. Although they are able to identify with one another, they need to survive in a world that does not really belong to them. Women are in fact often secondary characters in a male narrative who frequently are led to harass one another for a chance to be noticed by the protagonists.

Boland tries to depict women hidden behind symbols and shows that women's relationships with one another can be supportive. In "The Achill Woman," Boland brings into focus a woman's perception of another woman. The poetic voice is that of a young student who remembers her encounter with a simple woman of the Achill Island, Ireland's largest island. Despite the differences between them and the passage of time, the young woman is able to make a kind portrayal of her helper: "I remember the cold rosiness of her hands. / She bent down and blew on them like broth. / And round her waist, on a white background, / in coarse, woven letters, the words 'glass cloth'" (Boland 27). It is a description that tries to be as accurate as possible, but Boland's speaker does not fail to see the simple beauty of the scene in its details: such as the color in the woman's hands, "cold rosiness," which can be read as an indication of health. The poetic voice also notes her "glass cloth" that she probably uses for manual work and how the letters are "coarse" because she sewed them herself.

The poetic voice does not make any judgment on the woman and does not try to speak for her. Instead, Boland's speaker only shares with the reader a defining moment of her youth: "And she was nearly finished for the day. / And I was all talk, raw from college – / week-ending at a friend's cottage / with one suitcase and the set text / of the Court poets of the Silver Age" (27). But she is sincere in recognizing that, at the time, she did not realize the significance of that meeting because she was still "raw." She is more interested in her object of study, which according to Boland in *A Kind of Scar* is "those sixteenth-century English song writers, like Wyatt and Raleigh, whose lines appear so elegant, so off-hand, yet whose poems smell of the gallows" (73). Boland, like the poetic voice, focused on poetry written by foreign men from a distant time. Vicki Bertram acknowledges that: "As a keen young poet she [Boland] grappled, like her male colleagues, with the English poetic inheritance, quite blind to the indigenous material that lay all around her" (91). Meanwhile, the history of her own people embodied by the Achill woman escaped her attention:

but nothing now can change the way I went
 indoors, chilled by the wind
 and made a fire
 and took down my book
 and opened it and failed to comprehend

the harmonies of servitude,
 the grace music gives to flattery
 and language borrows from ambition – (Boland 28)

The poetic voice has gained wisdom over the years and only now is she able to recognize the significance of that meeting. In this last stanza, the poetic voice describes what she missed at the time, "harmonies" and "grace" that she was still immature to realize that they could exist

outside the books. In *A Kind of Scar*, Boland writes that the Achill woman was “the first person to talk to me about the famine. The first person, in fact, to speak to me with any force about the terrible parish of survival and death which the event had been in those regions” (74). The island woman shared with Boland her personal story about a dramatic episode in Irish history. From one woman to another, history comes alive and awakes a woman poet's consciousness about the suffered past of her foremothers.

In “We Are Always Too Late” there is also the meeting between two women, but they do not talk. The poetic voice recalls a past event in which she empathizes with another woman's feelings. She acknowledges from the beginning that the main theme here is memory, which for her “is in two parts” (Boland 42). Thus, the poem is divided into two “acts,” as if the reader was about to see a drama: “First, the re-visiting: / the way even now I can see / those lovers at the café table. She is weeping” (Boland 42). Indeed, the poetic voice goes back in time to “re-visit” a moment in which she was a witness of a small private drama.

Although she is touched by the woman's tears, the poetic voice is able to notice the scene outside: “New snow falls and the old, / losing its balance in the branches, / showers down, adding fractions to it” (Boland 42). The “new snow” that replaces the “old” one is a reminder of the passage of time. At that point, the poem goes to its second act: “Then / the re-enactment. Always that. / I am getting up, pushing away / coffee. Always, I am going towards her” (Boland 42). The poetic voice realizes she is in a performance, “the re-enactment,” only repeating her previous actions, “always that,” without being able to change them.

The beauty of nature makes an impression on her and she wants to share it with the crying woman: “I raise one hand. I am pointing to / those trees, I am showing her our need for these / beautiful upstagings of / what we suffer by / what survives. And she never even sees me” (Boland 42). One can sense her frustration with the limitations of memory; even though she can “re-visit” and “re-enact” a precise moment, the woman still “never even sees me.”

Although she may consider what happened from another perspective, her actions are always the same, as if she were actually a character in a play with “beautiful upstagings.” Despite the fact that the poem relies on one person’s memory, the poetic voice does not try to mislead the reader. She is aware that her memory can “re-visit” and “re-enact” the events. So every time she remembers the fact, something may be different. The one thing I believe that never changes is the empathy she felt at the time. She is able to understand another woman’s feelings and, as well as in the other poems analyzed here, she embraces sisterhood.

2.3 -Writing Back to Mythology

Addressing the concept of mythology, Pierre Brunel claims that: “Etymologically, the word [mythology] means a discourse on myth. However, in a more practical context it can be understood as designating a codified body of myths, and in fact is generally used in this sense, being applied especially to the body of Greek and Roman myths” (xi). In other words, the notion of mythology is associated with myths grouped together in classical literature.

In *Classical Mythology*, Mark Morford and Robert Lenardon maintain that the “word *myth* comes from the Greek word *mythos*, which means ‘word,’ ‘speech,’ ‘tale,’ or ‘story,’ and that is essentially what a myth is: a story” (1). That is to say that a myth is a human creation that comes alive in a narrative. For Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg the “word *mythos* meant precisely this in ancient Greece: a traditional story. In the transmission of traditional narrative it is of necessity the outline of events, the plot, which is transmitted. Plot is, in every sense of the word, the articulation of the skeleton of narrative. A myth, then, is a traditional plot which can be transmitted” (12). The notion of myth is close to the concept of literature in the sense that both develop narratives.

Undoubtedly, the classics of Greek and Roman literature had enormous influence on the formation of Western literature. In *The Classical Tradition*, Gilbert Highet states that

“modern world is in many ways a continuation of the world of Greece and Rome” (1). His statement is confirmed by the omnipresence of ancient works such as Homer’s *The Odyssey*, Virgil’s *The Aeneid* and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Since these ancient societies were fundamentally patriarchal, their literature reflected this system. There is in these examples a predominance of men as authors and women as characters. Sue Blundell agrees that:

Almost everything that we know about Greek women is derived ultimately from a masculine source – from the things which men said about women, from the images of women which they created in literature and art, and from the informal rules and legal regulations which they constructed in order to deal with women. Both as a group and as individuals, the women of Ancient Greece are to a large extent creatures who have been invented by men. (10)

The witches, female monsters, nymphs and goddesses that permeate Greco-Roman literature are male constructs in which, quite often, women are depicted in a misogynistic way.

More recently, many revisionist women writers, such as Boland and Duffy, have appropriated these myths and turned them into feminine constructs instead. Ostriker uses the term “revisionist mythmaking” to describe when “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” (212-13). The myth is used to tell new stories instead of being a tool to perpetuate the same old narratives.

In “The Making of an Irish Goddess,” Boland is inspired by the myth of Ceres, the Roman goddess of agriculture, to approach once again the Great Famine. Between the years of 1845 to 1850, Ireland suffered with potato blight. Since potatoes were the main food source for the majority of Irish population, it is estimated that one million people died of hunger during the 1840s. Ruth-Ann Harris observes that rural population suffered the most: “Few had the resources to flee the disaster, and the scene of their emaciated dying bodies lying by the

roadsides remains vivid in the folk memory to this day” (3). The calamity that affected the crops left deep marks in Irish society. Novels were written on the subject in the nineteenth century such as Margaret Brew’s *The Chronicles of Castle Cloyne; or, Pictures of the Munster People*, published in 1885 in three volumes, and Anthony Trollope’s *Castle Richmond*, also published in three volumes in 1860. Poems were also written such as “The Famine Year” by Jane Francesca Wilde, Oscar Wilde’s mother, published in *Poems by Speranza* in 1864.

The Great Famine remained a recurrent theme in Irish contemporary literature in the works of Walter Macken and Nuala O’Faolain, among others. In Boland’s “The Making of an Irish Goddess,” which also addresses the theme of the “Great Famine,” the relationship between mother and daughter is central to the poem and it is highlighted from the beginning: “Ceres went to hell / with no sense of time” (Boland 31). In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Ceres’s daughter, Proserpina, is kidnapped by Pluto and taken to the underworld. In her desperate search for Proserpina, Ceres only finds her daughter’s girdle and in Ovid’s words:

But yet with rage opprest,
 She curst all landes, and said they were unthankfull everychone,
 Yea and unworthy of the fruites bestowed them upon.
 But bitterly above the rest she banned Sicilie,
 In which the mention of hir losse she plainly did espie.
 And therefore there with cruell hand the earing ploughes she brake,
 And man and beast that tilde the grounde to death in anger strake. (129)

No wonder Boland connects this story to the tragedy experienced by Irish mothers during what became known also as the Irish Potato Famine. In both myth and history, the consequence is the same: starvation.

The poetic voice identifies herself with Ceres's suffering: "But I need time – / my flesh and that history – / to make the same descent" (Boland 31). She also needs to experience hell, "the same descent," to be able to tell her story, which is marked on her "flesh." This woman, who is also a mother, describes her own body with the bitterness of reality: "In my body, / neither young now nor fertile, / and with the marks of childbirth / still on it" (Boland 31). This is the body of a long-lived woman who has endured great pain. Undoubtedly, the issue of the feminine body has been a major theme of poetry written by women. As discussed earlier, in the colonial context, the female body represents the colonial land and it is thus transformed into a battlefield, in which it plays a role of symbolic resistance against Western invasion (Almeida 98). But the objectification of women's bodies is not exclusive to colonial contexts. Susan Rubin Suleiman claims that the female body has a central place in Western culture:

In the visual arts – from the prehistoric Venus of Willendorf to the countless representations of nymphs, goddesses, odalisques, and the Virgin Mother, right down to the images that grace our billboards and magazine covers – as in poetry, mythology, religious doctrine, medical and psychoanalytic treatises, and prose narratives of all kinds, we find ample testimony to the fascination that the female body has exerted on our individual and collective consciousness. And simultaneously with its attraction, we find testimony to the fear and loathing that that body has inspired: beautiful but unclean, alluring but dangerous, woman's body ... has appeared mysterious, duplicitous – a source of pleasure and nurturance, but also of destruction and evil. (1)

From ancient times to contemporary societies, the image of the female body has been omnipresent in the West. As discussed before by Ania Loomba, paradoxical feelings of aversion and desire emerge from the collective unconscious regarding women (151).

Within this context, women poets have claimed for themselves something that, throughout history, has been taken from them: authority over their own body and sexuality. In Ostriker's view, woman "has been discouraged from writing about the flesh herself, just as she has been forbidden to assume control over her sexual and reproductive life. Socially or intellectually, a free woman is a dangerous woman" (93). Ostriker reminds us that a way to control a woman is to hamper her connection to her own body. In this sense, when a woman writes for and about herself, she is no longer the muse shaped by the writing of others.

In "The Making of an Irish Goddess," the speaker's body is "neither young now nor fertile." It is the opposite of the sexualized and objectified image of the female body disseminated throughout Western culture, as discussed by Suleiman. The poetic voice's body is not an object of desire for the male gaze, but rather a body marked by a painful experience:

in my gestures –
 the way I pin my hair to hide
 the stitched, healed blemish of a scar –
 must be

an accurate inscription
 of that agony:

the failed harvests,
 the fields rotting to the horizon,
 the children devoured by their mothers
 whose souls, they would have said,
 went straight to hell,
 followed by their own. (Boland 32)

She is reminded of the famine by a “scar” on her body which is also a mark on her soul, “an accurate inscription of that agony.” Far from reproducing idealized images, the poetic voice exposes to the reader what feminine myths hide: the flaws, weaknesses, miseries and realities of the human condition. Boland distorts Ceres’s image as the rescuer mother, as acknowledged by Sara Sullivan: “The unchristened young victims of the famine descend to the underworld, followed by mothers who in this story are not the rescuers, but the destroyers” (348). Unlike Ceres, the famine mothers are not heroines, they are as much victims as their children, all of them “went straight to hell.”

The poetic voice claims that: “myth is the wound we leave / in the time we have” (Boland 32). She realizes that myths are a kind of cursed legacy that persists even in contemporary world. Thus, the poem ends enigmatically in modern Dublin where the poetic voice needs “to pick out / my own daughter from / all the other children in the distance; / her back turned to me” (Boland 32). I believe that this ending represents the pervasive “wound” of the myth, something that is passed on from one generation to another; in this case, the mother who, like Ceres, is still looking for her daughter. There is no way of knowing whether the meeting will actually happen or not, since the daughter’s back is turned.

One can say that in the stories of feminine myths, their suffering is often a result of men's actions. This is the case of Ceres's story, whose suffering is caused by Pluto. The same is true in Daphne’s story, another character of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Coincidentally, Ovid's work is also the main source of inspiration for Carol Ann Duffy in *The World’s Wife*, as I shall discuss in chapter 3. Therefore, it is worth asking why Ovid is a strong presence in the work of both poets. Dowson and Entwistle believe that in “making sense of the pattern of human existence, myth instructs us about our own expectations and anxieties, hence the apparently timeless popularity of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*” (233). So, if it is about the myths,

why would Ovid be more popular than other authors who also wrote about myths? Scholes and Kellogg suggest that:

Ovid's great influence on later literature ... derives not from his form but from the quantity of mythic materials he assembled in the *Metamorphoses* and made readily available; and, more significantly, from his interest in psychology, especially the psychology of love, which is apparent not only in the *Metamorphoses* but in the *Amores*, the *Ars Anatoria*, and the *Heroides* as well.
(71-72)

Thus, the great merit of the *Metamorphoses* would be its gathering of several myths in the same work along with Ovid's well-crafted psychological approach.

But what could be the appeal of Ovid's work for women writers? Curiously, Ovid's influence on women's writing has a long history. Carole Newlands and John Miller acknowledge in their introduction to *A Handbook to the Reception of Ovid* that an "interesting case is how women writers through the ages engage with Ovid's poetry" (2). The scholars mention some examples which are discussed in the edited collection: "during the Middle Ages Christine de Pizan and Heloise responded in important ways to that very *Art of Love* as well as to the *Heroides*, Ovid's fictional letters by heroines ... Much later, a handful of women writers shared in an early modern craze for the *Heroides* – writers like Aphra Behn, Mary Wortley Montagu and Jane Barker" (Newlands and Miller 2). Perhaps we could say that in the past, women writers searched for inspiration in Ovid's work since he had been a canonical author for centuries and addressed themes that were relevant to them.

The significant presence of Ovid is something in common between contemporary writers and their foremothers. However, if in the past Aphra Behn and others seemed more interested in Ovid's love poetry, today the main interest is the *Metamorphoses*. Besides Boland and Duffy, other poets such as Jo Shapcott and Alice Fulton, just to name a few, have

written revisions about characters in the *Metamorphoses*, published in the collection *After Ovid*. Alison Sharrock argues that “there is no doubt that the Ovidian corpus provides a particularly rich site for gendered study. More than any other non-dramatic ancient poetry, male-authored as it overwhelmingly is, Ovid’s work gives space to a female voice, in however problematic a manner, and to both male and female voices which reflect explicitly on their own gendered identity” (95). Considering the above, one can argue that the significant number of female characters in the *Metamorphoses* makes this work a relevant source for contemporary women writers who propose to rewrite classical stories in a new light.

In *Outside History*, Daphne is an inspiration for one of Boland’s poems. Daphne appears as one of the entries in John Lemprière’s *Classical Dictionary*, in which she is described as:

a daughter of the river Peneus or of the Ladon, by the goddess Terra, of whom Apollo became enamoured. This passion had been raised by Cupid, with whom Apollo, proud of his late conquest over the serpent Python, had disputed the power of his darts. Daphne heard with horror the addresses of the god, and endeavoured to remove herself from his importunities by flight. (236-237)

Boland makes a clear reference to this text in her poem’s title “Daphne Heard with Horror the Addresses of the God.” Possibly, for Boland this title sums up the tragic story of this woman myth, because it is a story about sexual violence. In the *Metamorphoses*, Daphne’s “horror” does not bother Apollo, who pursues her relentlessly. Faced with an impending rape, she begs her father to either let her be swallowed by earth or to change her shape. So, Daphne metamorphoses into a tree, but still Apollo does not leave her alone. Ovid writes:

Well (quoth Apollo) though my Feere and spouse thou can not bee,
Assuredly from this tyme forth yet shalt thou be my tree.

Thou shalt adorne my golden lockes, and eke my pleasant Harpe,

Thou shalt adorne my Quyver full of shaftes and arrowes sharpe. (22)

Even after she relinquishes her human form, Daphne is still possessed against her will.

Boland's poem is not a rewriting of Daphne's story, she does not have a voice in it, she is a "wounded presence." The poem focuses on a conversation between two women, probably mother and daughter. The setting is a garden and the mother tells her daughter, who assumes the poetic voice, about a wedding long ago. Meanwhile, the daughter focuses her attention on the garden:

I thought the garden looked so at ease.

The roses were beginning on one side.

The laurel hedge was nothing but itself,

and all of it so free of any need

for nymphs, goddesses, wounded presences –

the fleet river-daughters who took root

and can be seen in the woods in

unmistakable shapes of weeping. (Boland 35)

This stanza is a clear response to the myth of Daphne, "the fleet river-daughters who took root." If in the classical tradition that is the setting of a woman's misery, in Boland's version it is a peaceful place; a place "so free of any need / for nymphs, goddesses," a safe space. Rather than being a prison, a tree is nothing but a tree. Still, the speaker recognizes the lasting effect of myths in "unmistakable shapes of weeping."

After the mother finishes her story, the daughter still remains there: "I / stayed in the heat looking out at / the garden in its last definition. / Freshening and stirring. A suggestion, / behind it all, of darkness. In the shadow, / beside the laurel hedge, its gesture" (Boland 36). The garden is alive, "freshening and stirring," feminine myths still inhabit it. The daughter is

not completely alone in the garden; an oppressive past, “darkness,” lurks there, maybe just waiting for an opportunity to return and make “its gesture.” In my view, the title “Daphne Heard with Horror the Addresses of the God,” represents the “wounded presence” of myths in the lives of ordinary women and the poetic voice acknowledges her “presence,” a constant reminder of the pernicious omnipresence of myths.

Boland is well aware of how insidious myths can be. In “A False Spring,” she recalls her younger self studying Virgil in college. In particular, the sixth book of *The Aeneid* triggers her memory: “I want to find her, / the woman I once was, / who came out of that reading-room / in a hard January, after studying / Aeneas in the underworld” (29). The poetic voice realizes that, possibly, the one “who came out of that reading-room” has succumbed to the agonies of the underworld “in a hard January.” In the sixth book of *The Aeneid*, Aeneas is guided by the Sibyl in a search for his father, Anchises. In Boland’s poem, the poetic voice is guided by Boland herself in search of “the woman I once was.” However, the young woman is no longer the same.

After following Aeneas’s journey, she leaves the underworld with “her mind so frail her body was its ghost” (Boland 29). It is such a hard experience that her soul feels disconnected from her body; the student is now an empty skeleton. At that time, she still had no awareness of her place in an overwhelmingly male literary history. Certainly, the authority of a canonical epic poem written more than two thousand years ago can discourage a female undergraduate student. *The Aeneid* is mostly about men and how they interact with one another. Understandably, the young woman felt lost in this male world. Likewise, Boland had trouble finding her place in Irish literary tradition, since in her own words: “Irish poetry was predominantly male” (80). Fortunately, she was able to find her place by contesting the Western canon and focusing on women’s histories or herstories, as Looser would claim.

As a revisionist poet, who is now able to understand the distress of her former self, she wants to go back in time: “I want to tell her she can rest, / she is embodied now” (Boland 29). Patriarchy has not defeated her; however, she concedes that the past cannot be changed: “But narcissi, / opening too early, / are all I find” (Boland 30). The flowers of narcissus are typically associated with the end of winter and the beginning of spring; here their “opening too early” can be related to the “false spring” of the title. The rebirth promised by springtime does not happen. The poetic voice is left with “nothing to look forward to except / what one serious frost can accomplish” (Boland 30). I believe the “frost” symbolizes the deep marks left on her by “the underworld.” In the end, she gained knowledge from that experience. She knows that although the past is unalterable, that does not mean it cannot be rewritten.

The poems analyzed here that approach classical mythology are not written from the point of view of the characters Ceres, Daphne or even Aeneas. The poetic voices are that of ordinary women who react and somehow reflect about the impact of these myths on their lives. In these ancient stories, which have played a significant part in the Western collective imaginary, mothers are rescuers, young women are sexual objects and men are heroes. Boland juxtaposes these archetypes with her speakers and the reader is able to understand that, different from the mythological stories she refers to, the poetic voices are of women whose greatest achievement is the freedom to be who they want to be.

2.4 – A Profane Writer

Eavan Boland has always been concerned with the situation of women in Irish literary tradition. While men often appear as authors and active subjects, women tend to be placed in the position of muses, symbols, myths, etc. Within this context, a woman who speaks and writes for herself goes against a long-standing tradition. Boland reminds us that: “A woman poet is rarely regarded as an automatic part of a national poetic tradition ... She is too deeply

woven into the passive texture of that tradition, to intimate a part of its imagery, to be allowed her freedom” (88). To change this picture, women need to be active subjects and dismantle the discriminating nature of the canon. The meaning of a literary canon which concerns me here is given by W. J. T. Mitchell as being “the lists of great writers who are usually included in literary anthologies, discussed in the major books of literary history, and taught in schools and universities as the standard texts that are understood to be the heritage of a common literary culture” (20). Throughout history, the canon has been an authoritative model since its body of works and authors has had little diversity and has, most often, excluded women.

No wonder then that the canon has been strongly contested over the last decades. According to Mitchell, challenges “to the established canon of ‘dead white male European’ authors came from women, people of color, and first-generation academics who lacked the automatic reverence for traditional literary culture that sustains the stability of a canon” (21). Once the excluded ones were able to talk, they demanded rightfully that their voices be heard and that their works be considered as a relevant part of literary history. It is therefore necessary that classical mythology, which is a considerable part of the Western canon, be revised and rewritten, in the manner proposed by Adrienne Rich. Regarding women and the canon, Kathryn Graham states: “The reason why so many of these women writers are lost to us, why their work has disappeared, is that it has not become a part of the *canon*. The canon is that body of literature deemed worthy of study by the literary establishment which, historically, has been composed of white upper- and upper-middle-class men” (314-315). This means that, as I discuss in the first chapter, the oblivious destiny of numerous women writers is a result of the fact that they were mostly ignored by those who had the power to decide what books had value and what books did not have.

It can be argued that mythology, as well as the canon that preserves it, inhabits a sacred sphere. The act of disrespecting something considered sacred, a common reference in

Boland's poems, brings to mind the idea of profanation. The history of the word profane has French and Latin origins and according to *An Etymological Dictionary of The English Language* its etymology refers to that which is unholy, impious in the original sense of being "before the temple", hence, outside of the temple, secular, not sacred" (477). That is to say, this word can be used to describe that which is opposed to the sacred, which appears before that which is sacred. As the philosopher Giorgio Agamben puts it:

The Roman jurists knew perfectly well what it meant to "profane." Sacred or religious were the things that in some way belonged to the gods. As such, they were removed from the free use and commerce of men; they could be neither sold nor held in lien, neither given for usufruct nor burdened by servitude. Any act that violated or transgressed this special unavailability, which reserved these things exclusively for the celestial gods ... or for the gods of the underworld ..., was sacrilegious. And if "to consecrate" (*sacrare*) was the term that indicated the removal of things from the sphere of human law, "to profane" meant, conversely, to return them to the free use of men. (73)

If somebody crosses the line of what belongs to the gods and what belongs to human beings, then an act of profanation is committed. This invasion, or rejection, of the sacred sphere can be performed by means of transgression.

For John Stephens, the "general sense of 'transgression' is as a violation of, or going beyond the bounds of, a law, rule, command, or the like. Transgression is physical, cultural and moral" (987). Thus, in order to transgress, one needs to challenge the establishment. When one thinks about women and literature, transgression of the literary establishment seems inevitable. Western literary tradition, and its canon, can be considered part of a sacred sphere. In the terms discussed by Agamben, when a woman poet, such as Boland, invades this

sacred sphere, she profanes this tradition. Boland's act of transgression is to challenge and revise tradition and its mythology.

In *Outside History*, the poems demystify woman figures and their experiences. Bertram writes that the "problem with *Outside History*, for me, is that the poems seem quite happily outside history" (106) and later she states: "These poems are too quiet, too still, too cerebral" (106). I disagree with Bertram's view, because in my opinion the poems are deeply emotional in their denunciations of historical injustices. Moreover, the poetic voices contest the oversimplified portrayal of women in Western literature that occurred for centuries by means of addressing the themes of womanhood, sisterhood and mythology. The poems here analyzed demonstrate that it is possible to rewrite the tradition by appropriating the canon and, thus, resignifying women's literary history or herstory.

Eavan Boland writes poetry that focuses on women as active subjects, while questioning the construction of a canon that has excluded them. By doing so, she rescues her foremothers and helps to consolidate women's literary tradition. Fortunately, Boland is not alone in this revisionist quest. In the next chapter, I analyze the work of another woman poet who also contests the Western Canon.

CHAPTER THREE:

Carol Ann Duffy: A Tongue-in-Cheek Poet

These myths going round, these legends, fairytales,

I'll put them straight; so when you stare
 into my face – Helen's face, Cleopatra's,
 Queen of Sheba's, Juliet's – then, deeper,
 gaze into my eyes – Nefertiti's, Mona Lisa's,

Garbo's eyes – think again.

Carol Ann Duffy, "Mrs. Beast"

Carol Ann Duffy is a Scottish poet who is currently the United Kingdom's poet laureate. The honorary position dates back to the seventeenth century and she is the first woman to achieve this post. After four hundred years, it is notable that a woman has been chosen as poet laureate, especially since this is a writer whose work has a strong feminist edge. This important accomplishment shows Duffy's relevance in contemporary English language literature. As Boland, Duffy can be considered a revisionist poet who follows Adrienne Rich's concept of re-vision, discussed in the first chapter.

Another characteristic Duffy shares with Boland is her mordant criticism of myths. However, while Boland's main object of criticism is Irish literary tradition, Duffy proposes a re-vision of Western tradition as a whole. As mentioned in the epigraph that opens this chapter, she wants to "put straight" feminine myths that inhabit the Western canon from ancient times to the present. In one of her best-known collection of poems, *The World's Wife*, Duffy addresses myths of history, fiction and Greco-Roman mythology. She rewrites, reinterprets, and most importantly, contests the construction of these myths by an exclusionary tradition.

Angelica Michelis and Antony Rowland state about *The World's Wife*: "Myth, in its social as well as its literary sense, is one of the major areas Duffy re-views from a feminine,

and often feminist, perspective in this volume” (26). They recognize that re-vision of myths is central to Duffy’s work. Her engagement with feminist writing is also recognized by other critics, such as Elena Semino who, regarding *The World’s Wife*, claims: “In line with a well-established tradition in feminist writing, the poems expose the male bias in the ‘stories’ that dominate Western culture, and present the famous men of history and fantasy as weak, idiosyncratic, irrational, and, most of all, entirely self-centred” (34). She argues that Duffy’s work unveils sexism by displaying the male-centered focus of history. The critic also makes a relevant statement concerning the work’s title: “In the title of the collection, Duffy has modified the idiomatic expression [the world and his wife] by making *wife* the head of a noun phrase, thereby foregrounding the female member of the couple” (Semino 33-34). For Semino, when Duffy plays with her collection’s title, she is aiming at empowering women.

One of Duffy’s strategies to unveil patriarchal double standard against women is her humor. In *The World’s Wife* the reader is introduced to the wives of some famous characters, such as Tiresias, Pygmalion, and also to the wives of historical figures such as Freud and Darwin. Furthermore, Duffy appropriates traditional characters from classical literature, such as Medusa and Eurydice, among others. All poems are dramatic monologues, that is, poems in which the speaker does not address the reader directly, but a silent listener instead. In this case, the speaker often makes a speech in which a dramatic situation is revealed. Duffy’s speakers make their speeches with good doses of humor, wit and irony. Their mockery aims at men, patriarchy and the Western canon.

3.1 - Mythology or “Girls, forget what you’ve read”

As I discuss in the second chapter, the concept of mythology which concerns me in this research is “the body of Greek and Roman myths” (Brunel xi). Furthermore, the concept of myth I follow is Scholes and Kellogg’s definition of myth as “a traditional story” (12).

Considering the above, even though “mythology seems an inhospitable terrain for a woman writer” (Ostriker 211-12), a considerable number of women poets and writers has ventured on this subject. In addition to Carol Ann Duffy and Eavan Boland, other names come to mind such as A. S. Byatt, May Sarton and Sylvia Plath, just to name a few. In poetry as well as in fiction women seem to know that a returning to the past is necessary so that the future can be built; as Adrienne Rich emphasizes in her concept of re-vision. For this reason, she considers it “an act of survival” (11). How else can one explain the fact that so many women poets have written their own versions of Medusa, considering only the Greco-Roman mythology?

Ostriker believes that because “it is in the public domain, it [myth] confers on the writer the sort of authority unavailable to someone who writes ‘merely’ of the private self. Myth belongs to ‘high’ culture and is handed ‘down’ through the ages by religious, literary and educational authority” (213). Women writers seem to be fascinated by myths because they have the power to confer them some of their authority. Accordingly, it is no coincidence that of the thirty poems of *The World’s Wife*, eleven use classical mythical figures as poetic voices. One of them is precisely the tragic figure of Medusa. Although she became known as a monster with snake hair, she was once a beautiful woman, according to Perseus’s narrative in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*:

She both in comly port
 And beautie, every other wight surmounted in such sort,
 That many suters unto hir did earnestly resort.
 And though that whole from top to toe most bewtifull she were,
 In all hir bodie was no part more goodly than hir heare. (111-112)

Ironically, it is Medusa’s beauty that seals her fate:

It is reported how she should abusde by Neptune bee
 In Pallas Church: from which fowle facte Joves daughter turnde hir eye,

And with hir Target hid hir face from such a villanie.

And lest it should unpunisht be, she turned hir seemely heare

To lothly Snakes. (Ovid 112)

Medusa is cruelly punished, despite being a victim of Neptune's abuse. Her heartbreaking story illustrates the deep-rooted misogyny of classical tradition. Alastair Blanshard observes that: "Western culture has shown itself remarkably sympathetic to the misogyny of antiquity. The traditional privileging of male activity and its anxieties about female power in Greece and Rome have regularly found an audience who have been only too keen to hear and repeat its phallogocentric maxims" (328). In other words, the West has embraced ancient misogyny because it was convenient, since Greek and Roman cultures were in line with European sexist notions about women.

Therefore, it is not hard to think of re-vision when we read the story of a woman who is raped and held responsible for that. It is worth mentioning that even today rape victims are often blamed for being raped. In an attempt to do justice to Medusa, many women writers and poets wrote their own version of the myth, such as A. S. Byatt's "Medusa's Ankles," Sylvia Plath's "Medusa," May Sarton's "The Muse as Medusa," among others. Likewise, she also inspired the famous article by French feminist Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," in which she states: "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing" (885). Cixous urges her readers to envisage Medusa beyond her so-called monstrosity. Most importantly, the French critic discusses women's writing as a way of rebelling against a phallogocentric culture. For her, the myth of Medusa and other representations of women created by men, keeps women from writing their own accounts of femininity. When women are no longer afraid of Medusa's image because rather than being terrifying, "she's laughing," they can get in touch with their own bodies through their own writing. It must be taken into account that Medusa was labeled an

abomination in narratives which have for years endorsed patriarchal values. So, it makes sense for feminists to seek to restore Medusa's forfeit humanity.

Duffy, as a feminist poet, also gives voice to this recurrent image of woman. If in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* she is an antagonist of the hero Perseus, in Duffy's "Medusa" she emerges as a complex protagonist. Moreover, in Duffy's version Medusa is a woman in love and crazy with jealousy: "A suspicion, a doubt, a jealousy / grew in my mind, / which turned the hairs on my head to filthy snakes, / as though my thoughts / hissed and spat on my scalp" (40). The poetic voice's hair is transformed into "filthy snakes" not because of a curse but rather because of her "suspicion." She is unable to control her "thoughts," therefore they "hissed and spat" like actual snakes. For Duffy, the Gorgon, another name by which Medusa is known, which in Greek mythology refers to a monster figure, is just a woman who cannot control her feelings.

Like many jealous characters, Duffy's Medusa is discomposed by fear of losing her beloved Perseus: "Be terrified. / It's you I love, / perfect man, Greek God, my own; / but I know you'll go, betray me, stray / from home. / So better by far for me if you were stone" (Duffy 40). Frenzied, she threatens him, "be terrified." Her loved one is a "perfect man" at least physically; morally he may not be so "perfect" because she is sure he will "betray" her. Duffy plays with Medusa's power to turn beholders to stone devising a justification for her actions. The poetic voice thinks her supposedly unfaithful fiancé would be better as a "stone," so he could never "stray from home" again. Clearly, her love is a possessive and even unhealthy one. As Othello in Shakespeare's homonymous play, Medusa would rather kill than being betrayed.

Interestingly, Louis Lo claims that: "jealousy is promoted within patriarchy and logocentricism" (3). He thus observes that if "the gender of jealousy is masculine, it suggests that a jealous woman is masculinized" (Lo 6). I agree that it is possible to consider jealousy as

mostly a masculine feeling. At least when it comes to sexual jealousy, men tend to be more violent than women. Biologist Randy Thornhill and anthropologist Craig T. Palmer argue that in “its extreme forms, sexual jealousy leads men to commit violence against their mates and/or against male competitors they perceive as paternity threats” (43). In other words, male jealousy is often related to the need to ensure procreation since, unlike women, it is claimed that men cannot be absolutely certain of their paternity.

In Duffy’s “Medusa,” the poetic voice’s violent jealousy reverses the gender roles and makes Medusa an unnatural woman. She resembles the frequently portrayed literary male character with murderous impulse towards his partner. Hence, Medusa's ugly side makes its appearance: “I stared in the mirror. / Love gone bad / showed me a Gorgon” (Duffy 41). The green-eyed monster is the real abomination, the “Gorgon.” The woman, not the myth, suffers because of her suspicion: “And here you come / with a shield for a heart / and sword for a tongue / and your girls, your girls. / Wasn’t I beautiful? / Wasn’t I fragrant and young?” (Duffy 41). Duffy refers to the “shield” Perseus uses to defend himself from Medusa’s eyes as the fiancé’s “heart” and the “sword” he uses to decapitate her as his “tongue.” As in mythology, the poetic voice is also hurt, only this time she is hurt by words. Like Ovid’s Medusa who was once a beautiful woman, Duffy’s Medusa complains that she too was once “beautiful,” “fragrant” and “young,” but now she has probably lost her youthful attractiveness and consequently she has also lost her fiancé’s love.

In these last lines of the poem, it is possible to understand and even to empathize with her emotionally fragile state. After all, Medusa is no longer young and beautiful. Her last cry carries an ironic double meaning: “Look at me now” (Duffy 41). It can either refer to the power of Medusa’s look to turn everything into stone or, as Jeffrey Wainwright puts it: “But ‘Look at me now’ is also a sorrowing cliché of the once beautiful woman. Thus is this

apparent female power turned to tragic defeat” (53). Indeed, apparently, Medusa is devastated by the loss of her ephemeral mastery over Perseus.

Duffy’s contemporary Medusa also suffers for her belief in the myth of beauty. In her book, *The Beauty Myth*, first published in 1991, US feminist writer Naomi Wolf argues that: “We are in the midst of a violent backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women’s advancement: the beauty myth” (10). For Wolf, this myth has been used to maintain control over women. This means that if they are concerned about their physical appearance, they will not have time to fight for gender equality. When Wolf writes about aging, she observes that:

Youth and (until recently) virginity have been “beautiful” in women since they stand for experiential and sexual ignorance. Aging in women is “unbeautiful” since women grow more powerful with time, and since the links between generations of women must always be newly broken: Older women fear young ones, young women fear old, and the beauty myth truncates for all the female life span. (14)

For Wolf, beauty is associated with youth because younger women are unexperienced and therefore easier to control. Once women get older, they are considered ugly because they have gained experience. Medusa’s despair about the advancement of age and her anger at Perseus’s “girls” are symptoms of the beauty myth she has incorporated since she knows she has lost her “value” and she will inevitably be replaced by younger versions of herself.

Another negative consequence of the myth is repression of female sexuality, which is “turned inside out from birth, so ‘beauty’ can take its place, keeping women’s eyes lowered to their own bodies, glancing up only to check their reflections in the eyes of men” (Wolf 155). Wolf argues that women are taught to believe that their sexuality is something external to

them. Medusa, for instance, believes her sexuality is embodied in her “beauty” reflected in Perseus’s eyes.

On the other hand, in Duffy’s “Pygmalion’s Bride,” a sexually submissive woman decides to change the course of events. First, it is relevant to discuss Duffy’s source of inspiration. The Pygmalion myth is part of Greek Mythology, however, his story is best known from the *Metamorphoses*, in which Pygmalion is a sculptor who falls in love with the statue of a woman that he creates himself. The myth was also an inspiration for Irish playwright Bernard Shaw to write his famous play *Pygmalion*, first performed in 1913.

According to Ovid’s verses:

Offended with the vice whereof great store is packt within
 The nature of the womankynd, he led a single lyfe.
 And long it was ere he could fynd in hart to take a wyfe.
 Now in the whyle by wondrous Art an image he did grave
 Of such proportion, shape, and grace as nature never gave
 Nor can to any woman give. In this his worke he tooke
 A certaine love. (256)

Ovid is part of a misogynistic tradition, as feminist critics have pointed out (Katharine Rogers), for in his “Pygmalion” a woman of flesh and blood is not worthy of his affection. Thus, he accomplishes his desire to have a totally submissive woman by carving a statue. In Shaw’s play, a phonetics professor accepts a bet to transform a simple girl who sells flowers into an aristocratic lady by changing her speech. While in Ovid’s version we have Pygmalion’s point of view, in Duffy’s the statue herself, following the writer’s aim to give voice to silenced women, is the one who tells the story. Transgressing the rules of traditional poetry, the muse speaks for herself: “Cold, I was, like snow, like ivory. / I thought *He will not touch me*, / but he did” (Duffy 51). Duffy emphasizes the poetic voice’s inanimate condition

by her choice of words; she is then apparently frigid, “cold,” and dead as “ivory.” From the beginning, the poetic voice makes clear that she has a very different opinion of the matter. She does not have the faintest interest in the sculptor, but her will is not taken into account. Despite the statue’s disbelief, Pygmalion touches her: “He kissed my stone-cool lips. / I lay still / as though I’d died” (Duffy 51). As a quintessential muse who is completely passive, “as though I’d died,” the bride is kissed by Pygmalion, even though, or perhaps because of it, she cannot kiss him back.

So far, he feels at ease with his partner because she is apparently lifeless. However, she complains: “He spoke – / blunt endearments, what he’d do and how. / His words were terrible” (Duffy 51). The poetic voice emphasizes that “He” is the one who “spoke,” and this line stands alone because it does not matter what was said. This line is not only about Pygmalion’s right to speech, but it is also about poetic tradition in which men are the ones who speak. Sarah Parker agrees that: “For centuries, the active, shaping task of poetic creation has been associated with masculinity, while the role of silent, inspiring muse has been associated with femininity” (12). In other words, traditionally, men can be creative and women need to be contemplative instead. The situation of “Pygmalion’s Bride” mirrors this historical convention. It is intriguing, to say the least, that of the seven stanzas of the poem, four begin with the pronoun “he”.

The male pronoun is the predominant one until the fifth stanza:

He brought me presents, polished pebbles,

.....

He brought me pearls and necklaces and rings.

He called them *girly things*.

He ran his clammy hands along my limbs. (Duffy 51)

The patriarchal origin of the story is highlighted by this detail. In Ovid's version, the bride's desire is never mentioned. The only thing that matters is Pygmalion's desire. Woman's outlook, which is absent in the original story, is the greatest asset of Duffy's version. The poetic voice not only has the opportunity to tell her side of the story, but also to provide a new ending to it.

In the penultimate stanza, she decides to reverse the roles: "So I changed tack, / grew warm, like candle wax, / kissed back, / was soft, was pliable, / began to moan, / got hot, got wild" (Duffy 52). In an exciting turn of events, the poetic voice discloses her own sexuality. Duffy's choice of words creates an interesting contrast to her description of the poetic voice in the first stanza. Pygmalion's bride is no longer "cold," she is "warm;" she is not "like ivory" anymore, now she is "like candle wax," she is truly alive. She refuses to be an object and becomes a subject. Ironically, a fake orgasm sets her free: "and at the climax / screamed my head off – / all an act. / And haven't seen him since. / Simple as that" (Duffy 52). As a result, the former statue is no longer Pygmalion's ideal bride. Once she regains control of her own being, she also takes ownership of the story. Abandoning sexual submission, the poetic voice takes on a role that is traditionally reserved for men: the one who seduces and controls sexual activity.

Undoubtedly, women's sexual submission is an inherent characteristic of traditional societies, and consequently, of literary tradition. It is not hard to think of some examples, such as the story of Daphne and of Ceres's daughter, Proserpina, both discussed in the second chapter. Sexual violence against women is not only manifested in classical literature, but it extends to the Renaissance, as it is the case of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, in which Lavinia is raped and has her tongue and hands chopped off. Even in more contemporary literature, female characters such as Blanche DuBois in Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* are punished when they reject submissiveness. In Duffy's poem, the poetic

voice breaks with this lineage of victimized women when she objects to her original role of a sexually submissive woman for male fantasy in Pygmalion's story. Her insubordinate sexuality not only scares Pygmalion and sends him away, but it also attacks one of the bases of patriarchy, which is the control of women's sexuality.

Given this, Duffy also twists the rules of patriarchy in "from Mrs Tiresias," in which a man turns into a woman. Tiresias is a blind prophet in Greek mythology, depicted in Homer's *Odyssey* and Sophocles's *Antigone*. He is also one of the characters in the *Metamorphoses*. In Ovid's account, his transformation occurs because:

For finding once two mightie Snakes engendring in a Wood,
 He strake them overthwart the backs, by meanes whereof beholde
 (As straunge a thing to be of truth as ever yet was tolde)
 He being made a woman straight, seven winter lived so. (72)

So, Tiresias is changed into a woman as a punishment. In "from Mrs. Tiresias," his wife has a straightforward explanation for the phenomenon: "All I know is this: / he went out for his walk a man / and came home female" (Duffy 14). For the poetic voice, the cause is not as important as the consequences. She knows her uneventful life in which her husband "liked to hear / the first cuckoo of spring / then write to *The Times*" (Duffy 14) will never be the same. It is a British tradition to write a letter to the newspaper *The Times* about hearing the first cuckoo; the arrival of the bird in Europe announces spring. Probably, this means that Tiresias is a traditional man.

Duffy explores the impact of the myth in a heterosexual relationship. At first, the wife cannot believe her eyes and ears: "The eyes were the same. / But in the shocking V of the shirt were breasts. / When he uttered my name in his woman's voice I passed out" (Duffy 15). This is the worst nightmare of a heteronormative society, a man with a "shocking" cleavage revealing his "breasts" and speaking in a "woman's voice." The borders between genders are

violated, compromising the conventional binary oppositions of male and female. If the husband is not a man anymore, what is he anyway? What about the gender roles? Under these circumstances, can they still be a couple?

The fragile base of gender constructions and heterosexuality is called into question. In her influential book, *Gender Trouble*, US philosopher Judith Butler states: “The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire” (31). For Butler, heteronormativity depends on the social construction of gender in which only two opposite sexes can coexist. Thus, anyone who deviates from this pattern is marginalized within society.

In an attempt to continue as a member of the heteronormative club, Mrs. Tiresias tells a pack of lies: “Life has to go on. / I put it about that he was a twin / and this was his sister / come down to live / while he himself / was working abroad” (Duffy 15). Although she may keep up appearances, her home life cannot be saved. Transgenderism comes at a price: “Then he started his period. / One week in bed. / Two doctors in. / Three painkillers four times a day” (Duffy 15). It is the so-called gentle sex’s revenge. Tiresias, supposedly strong for being a man, is unable to bear the pain women have to tolerate since puberty. In this sense, he becomes a reluctant martyr to sexism with his “three painkillers four times a day.”

Simone de Beauvoir acknowledges the taboos surrounding a woman’s period: “on the day she can reproduce, woman becomes impure; and rigorous taboos surround the menstruating female. Leviticus gives elaborate regulations, and many primitive societies have similar rules regarding isolation and purification” (167-168) and thus she develops her argument further: “The blood, indeed, does not make a woman impure; it is rather a sign of her impurity. It concerns generation, it flows from the parts where the fetus develops. Through menstrual blood is expressed the horror inspired in man by woman’s fecundity”

(169). That being so, menstruation is a constant reminder of the woman's reproductive power, perhaps the only power man cannot possess.

Tiresias learns female pain but still makes reference to the age old negative associations to it. Perhaps because of this, he paraphrases Kurtz's horror in *Heart of Darkness* as: "*The curse, he said, the curse*" (Duffy 16). However, through the wife's ironic remarks it is possible to read Tiresias's overreaction to menstrual cramps as a reminder about which sex is actually the weaker. Besides, at every opportunity, Duffy exposes the ridiculousness of macho dogmas: "*Don't kiss me in public, / he snapped the next day, / I don't want folk getting the wrong idea*" (16). The husband not only discloses his homophobic feelings, but also his hypocrisy. Predictably, the marriage breaks up and Tiresias takes on the role of woman before the world.

He is seen by his ex "on the arms of powerful men" (Duffy 16) and he goes so far as to appear "on TV / telling the women out there / how, as a woman himself, / he knew how we felt" (Duffy 16). Tiresias's assumption that he can speak for women, "as a woman himself," is analogous to the repression of women's voices in literary history. Male writers have created myths, legends and muses as woman's representations, but they are actually stereotypes that imprison women in masculine concepts of femininity. Likewise, Tiresias, who did not wish to be a woman, despite his statements on TV, only mimics what he believes to be a woman because he cannot really know "how we felt." Mrs. Tiresias may recognize that in his appearance: "The one thing he never got right / was the voice" (Duffy 17). However, she knows that in the inside he is still a man, because she never speaks of him as a "she." At the final meeting of the former couple, Duffy puts gender identities to the test. Mrs. Tiresias introduces her female lover to her ex and she notes "the way he stared / at her violet eyes" (Duffy 17), and she also "saw him picture / her bite, / her bite at the fruit of my lips, / and hear / my red wet cry in the night" (Duffy 17). Tiresias's "picture" of his ex-wife and her

lover, his stare “at her violet eyes,” indicates that he envies Mrs. Tiresias’s current relationship and at the same time demonstrates his aversion to such a homosexual connection. His physical appearance may have changed, but his desires and his moral judgments are still the same. Duffy unveils the complexity of human sexuality and the hypocrisy of a heteronormative culture. It is clear that Mrs. Tiresias has tried to conform herself to cultural standards. Her husband’s metamorphosis gives her a chance to break free of conventionalism and embrace her identity as a lesbian. Furthermore, this identity is no longer attached to her husband or to her role as a wife.

Another mythical figure who searches her own identity in *The World’s Wife* is Eurydice. The story of Eurydice and her husband Orpheus is also in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. On her wedding day, she is bitten by a serpent and dies. Orpheus plays his lyre and persuades Pluto, king of the underworld, to let him rescue his wife. Following her other re-visions of Ovid, Duffy brings to light the untold story. In “Eurydice,” the poetic voice – Eurydice herself – makes a point of addressing women: “Girls, I was dead and down” (Duffy 58). This approach immediately creates complicity between Eurydice and her desired audience. In her view, it is clear that only women are able to understand her. In the first stanza she also clarifies what her feelings about poetry are when she describes her new home:

It was a place where language stopped,
 a black full stop, a black hole
 where words had to come to an end.
 And end they did there,
 last words,
 famous or not.
 It suited me down to the ground. (Duffy 58)

She seems pleased to be dead because she is in a place “where words had come to an end.” Eurydice is free of words and she confesses that “it suited me down to the ground.” She is happy for being free of language and also away from her husband. For the reader who knows the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice as a couple whose love defied death, her feeling is, at the very least, intriguing. She portrays her husband as:

... the kind of a man
 who follows her round
 writing poems,
 hovers about
 while she reads them,
 calls her His Muse,
 and once sulked for a night and a day
 because she remarked on his weakness for abstract nouns. (Duffy 58)

Here we can understand why Eurydice is happy for being dead and far away from language. She is tired of Orpheus following “her round” while “writing poems.” Eurydice’s mordant humor demolishes Orpheus’s mythical image as a great charmer. He is unmasked as an insecure and immature man who “sulked for a night and day” because of a criticism. Moreover, his vanity is fed by his wife’s approval. Wittily, Duffy creates a metapoem in which the poetic voice sarcastically comments on her own role in Western literary tradition, the one who “reads” the poems written by a man and who is unfairly awarded the epithet “His Muse.”

Many of the poems by Duffy carry this mordant critic of literary tradition and especially of poetry as metacommentary. Frederick Burwick acknowledges that in “Greek, the prefix *meta-* designated *after* either in spatial order or in temporal sequence” (162). Furthermore, Burwick describes metapoetry as a “term for self-conscious poems that call

attention to the themes, tropes, or rhymes the poet is currently exercising. Metapoetry involves self-conscious commentary on the creative process, the poem's genre, or the poet's concern for his poem" (162). For Burwick, the central theme of a metapoem is poetry itself, either in its formal or thematic aspects. The poetic voice is thus aware, self-conscious, of the effect produced by the poem.

In Duffy's "Eurydice," the poetic voice self-consciously highlights the artifices of poetry written by men in order to expose forms of oppression by which women are subjugated. For instance, when she complains that: "Things were different back then. / For the men, verse-wise, / Big O was the boy. Legendary" (Duffy 59), she regards literary tradition as a men's club in which members praise only each other. On top of that, she does not recognize any value in her husband's poetry: "Bollocks. (I'd done all the typing myself, / I should know.) / And given my time all over again, / rest assured that I'd rather speak for myself / than be Dearest, Beloved, Dark Lady, White Goddess, / etc., etc" (Duffy 59). Eurydice quotes other stereotypical and sexist epithets, besides "His Muse," male poets have awarded women, "Dearest" and so on. In addition, in like manner as many women in the past, her contribution to a man's work was erased from history, such as Dorothy Wordsworth's well-known influence on the poetry of her brother William – she was also the one who typed most of his work. Justifiably, Eurydice rejects the stereotypes created by male writers in which women are no more than dumb caricatures of themselves.

Eurydice is aware that she is a hostage to a male-dominated system: "But the Gods are like the publishers, / usually male, / and what you doubtless know of my tale / is the deal" (Duffy 59). However, this does not mean she complies with it. She satirizes male obsession with divinity; men think they are gods and so are the publishers. In Mary Daly's view: "Exclusively masculine symbolism for God, for the notion of divine 'incarnation' in human nature, and for the human relationship to God reinforce sexual hierarchy" (4). For Daly, when

one associates men to the Almighty, masculine supremacy is legitimized. The feminist philosopher goes further and states: “I have already suggested that if God is male, then the male is God” (Daly 19). In other words, it is no coincidence that God has always been regarded as a man. When only men are often deified, all that is left for women to do is to worship them.

Orpheus feels like a god and he expects his wife to venerate him as such. She, however, is tired of that and wants to remain dead, but Orpheus insists on rescuing her:

Orpheus strutted his stuff.

The bloodless ghosts were in tears.

Sisyphus sat on his rock for the first time in years.

Tantalus was permitted a couple of beers.

The woman in question could scarcely believe her ears.

Like it or not,

I must follow him back to our life –

Eurydice, Orpheus’ wife –

to be trapped in his images, metaphors, similes,

octaves and sextets, quatrains and couplets,

elegies, limericks, villanelles,

histories, myths ... (Duffy 60).

Duffy parodies Ovid’s verses:

... As he this tale did tell,

And played on his instrument, the bloodlesse ghostes shed teares:

To tyre on Titius growing hart the greedy Grype forbears:
 The shunning water Tantalus endevereth no to drink:
 And Danaus daughters ceast to fill theyr tubbes that have no brink.
 Ixions wheele stood still: and downe sate Sisyphus uppon
 His rolling stone. (250)

She simplifies Ovid's account, focusing on men's overemotional reactions in order to expose the ridiculousness of the situation. In contrast, Eurydice "could scarcely believe her ears," since nobody bothers to ask her what she has to say about it. It is a paradoxical situation in which her so-called release from the underworld actually means her imprisonment in Orpheus's "images, metaphors, similes" and so on. She is about to go back to a life in which her primary role is that of a wife, simply "Orpheus' wife."

She is desperate to escape the images Orpheus has created for her. Eurydice's arguments echo those found in Gilbert and Gubar's work when they write: "Like the metaphor of literary paternity itself, this corollary notion that the chief creature man has generated is woman has a long and complex history. From Eve, Minerva, Sophia, and Galatea onward, after all, patriarchal mythology defines woman as created by, from, and for men, the children of male brains, ribs, and ingenuity" (12). For Gilbert and Gubar, since ancient times, women have been considered creations of male writers, symbols of male creativity. Eurydice and Pygmalion's Bride can be regarded as rebellious "daughters" of this tradition.

Eurydice defies patriarchal control and dares to rewrite her own story: "Girls, forget what you've read. / It happened like this – / I did everything in my power / to make him look back" (Duffy 61). She raises her voice against the silencing of women and urges them to "forget what you've read." Rather than reading the traditional narrative, which is often a man's version, the reader is introduced to Eurydice's story from her perspective. We learn that, in fact, she had an active role in the outcome of the story.

In Ovid's account, Orpheus looks back out of love:

... And now they were within
 A kenning of the upper earth, when Orphye did begin
 To dowl him lest shee followed not, and through an eager love
 Desyrous for to see her he his eyes did backward move
 Immediatly shee slipped backe. (250)

Ovid assigns Eurydice's fate to her husband's noble feelings. In Duffy's version, Eurydice uses Orpheus's vanity in her favor: "I was thinking of filching the poem / out of his cloak, / when inspiration finally struck. / I stopped, thrilled. / He was a yard in front. / My voice shook when I spoke – / *Orpheus, your poem's a masterpiece. / I'd love to hear it again...*" (61). She is the real poet whose "inspiration" sets her free. Through her use of metapoetry, Duffy creates a self-conscious speaker that mocks traditional poetry: "What else? / I noticed he hadn't shaved. / I waved once and was gone" (62). For the poetic voice, the tragic end of Orpheus's story is her happy ending; in her account, Orpheus is just a man who "hadn't shaved." Duffy's outspoken Eurydice reminds us how the history of literature has supported gender hierarchy. More importantly, she urges women poets to mistrust an establishment that endorses female invisibility.

Different from Boland's poems about myths, Duffy's "mythical" poems are mostly written from the point of view of female characters from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Duffy literally puts words in the myths' mouths. She takes ownership of the stories of Medusa, Eurydice, Pygmalion's bride and she creates a wife for Tiresias, so that a different version of Ovid's story can be told by a woman. The poetic voices criticize directly the misogyny of classical literature. Moreover, Duffy explores metapoetry as a tool that helps to expose how literary and poetic languages have persistently ignored women as writers, relegating them to the position of passive muses and sources of inspiration.

3.2 - The Bible or “ain’t life a bitch”

The Bible is certainly one of the oldest narratives of the Western world and perhaps the most traditional one. Jo Carruthers acknowledges that:

The influence of the Bible on Western literature is incalculably powerful and diffuse, not least because ... the Bible is the archetypal literary text. It has been written and rewritten, interpreted and ‘misinterpreted’, revised and supplemented, in innumerable poems, plays, novels, stories and essays from the Anglo-Saxon period to postmodernism. (253)

In addition to its religious status, the Bible has been a source of inspiration for writers throughout the centuries, as Greco-Roman mythology has also been. Not incidentally, myths play an important part in biblical narrative. According to R. Seth C. Knox: “Bible tales derive largely from two sources: mythological traditions and oral/folk traditions” (119). Myth is one of its sources and probably one of the most known myths in the Bible is that of the creation. At this point it is important to highlight that in the Bible, myths are more than traditional stories, they are considered sacred stories. Northrop Frye argues that:

Certain stories seem to have a peculiar significance: they are stories that tell a society what is important for it to know, whether about its gods, its history, its laws, or its class structures. These stories may be called myths in a secondary sense, a sense that distinguishes them from folktales – stories told for entertainment or other less central purposes. They thus become “sacred” as distinct from “profane” stories, and form part of what the Biblical tradition calls revelation. This distinction may not exist in many “primitive” societies, but it usually gets established sooner or later, and once established it may persist for centuries. In Western Europe the Bible stories had a central mythical significance of this kind until at least the eighteenth century. Mythical, in this

secondary sense, therefore means the opposite of “not really true”: it means being charged with a special seriousness and importance. (32-33)

For Frye, some mythical stories are regarded as sacred because of their importance to the construction of societies. In this sense, biblical stories are myths that have acquired a sacred status throughout history.

J. R. Porter also claims that the “Bible contains what may be called myths in the strict sense: sacred stories set in an indeterminate ‘time of beginnings’, in which the actors are divine or superhuman beings. These stories seek to account for the fundamental origins of the world, humanity, and social institutions” (20). Bible stories bear similarities to many myths in their attempt to explain the universe. For instance, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* begins with the story of creation. The biblical myth of creation described in the Book of Genesis is the story of Adam and Eve. It is a story that illustrates the biblical approach concerning gender roles. Deborah Sawyer observes that:

For two millennia, when questions have arisen regarding the appropriate roles for men and women, Jewish and Christian commentators have had recourse to sacred texts, many of which they share. It is assumed that the explanation of the origin and cause for the differences between men and women is contained within these sacred texts. Furthermore, their sacred nature ensures the authority and veracity of the explanation. (7)

The Bible has often been used to endorse a discourse of gender bias within the Judeo-Christian culture. The creation myth is an example of a biblical passage constantly evoked in order to justify gender differences.

Although Eve is the first woman, the mother of humanity, she is originally the “daughter” of Adam, the first man. Therefore, she owes obedience to him. Besides that, she is also held responsible for the original sin, as discussed in the first chapter. Eve’s alleged

“disobedience” to God’s command has frequently been used as a justification for misogyny since she is the one who is “tempted” by the devil disguised as a serpent. Moreover, she supposedly causes Adam to sin as well because she gives him the forbidden fruit. God expels both of them from the Garden of Eden, but harsher punishment is inflicted on Eve and, consequently, on all women: labor pain and subordination to the husband. It is a story that seeks to sanctify and naturalize male dominance over women, after all if they are maintained under constant surveillance they cannot follow suit Eve’s “bad” example.

Eve’s myth has influenced the treatment of women throughout history, but she is not the only biblical personification of allegedly dangerous female behavior. Women had their names traditionally associated to seduction by means of the biblical figures such as Delilah and Salome, just to cite a couple of them. Both figures represent a certain male fear of female sexuality. These women are portrayed as dangerous women who seduce men and are able to control them; thus the “divine” natural order in which men control women is reversed. Therefore, Delilah, Salome and others are considered evil women and often portrayed as villains in other versions of the biblical myth.

In *The World’s Wife*, women figures from the Bible are strong, fearless and they are not willing to submit to patriarchal authority. Duffy’s “Delilah” is a defense of the famous reputedly temptress of the Old Testament. She is not motivated by money, as she is in the biblical story, but by Samson’s will: “Teach me, he said – / we were lying in bed – / how to care” (Duffy 28). Despite his immense physical strength, Samson is emotionally weak. His identity is defined by violence: “I can rip out the roar / from the throat of a tiger, / or gargle with fire, / or sleep one whole night in the Minotaur’s lair, / or flay the bellowing fur / from a bear, / all for a dare” (Duffy 28). He may be capable of such “feats;” he can torture animals, face a mythical creature or challenge his own mortality gargling “with fire.” However, he feels something is missing: “but I cannot be gentle, or loving, or tender. / I have to be strong. /

What is the cure?" (Duffy 28). Unknowingly, Samson is actually questioning the notion of masculinity when he acknowledges that he "cannot be gentle" because he has "to be strong."

Samson's aggressiveness and insensitivity conform to commonsensical notions of manhood. Men are supposed to be rational individuals, while women are the ones assumed to be essentially emotional beings, as Sara Ahmed argues (170). Samson can be considered a symbol of normative masculine since he apparently has no emotions and does not know "how to care." He is entrapped into an emotional emptiness as a result of his attachment to traditional gender roles; so he asks Delilah for "the cure." In Delilah's mind the message is clear: "And, yes, I was sure / that he wanted to change, / my warrior" (Duffy 29). For her, Samson needs to be freed of his gift that is in fact a curse:

And before I fetched and sharpened my scissors –
snipping first at the black and biblical air –
I fastened the chain to the door.

That's the how and the why and the where.

Then with deliberate, passionate hands.

I cut every lock of his hair. (Duffy 29)

Here, we can also see characteristics of a metapoem. Delilah is a self-conscious speaker, she knows she is a character in a biblical story, so first she snipes "the black and biblical air" because she wants to change her story. Moreover, when Duffy writes: "That's the how and the why and the where" – a quotation that also appears in the title of this thesis – she refers to Margaret Atwood's "Happy Endings," a metafictional short story in which a narrator describes the act of writing a story: "That's about all that can be said for plots, which anyway are just one thing after another, a what and a what and a what. Now try How and Why" (56).

In this short fiction, Atwood's narrator proposes a challenge, to "kill" the story, and Duffy seems to accept it. In Duffy's poem, the "how and the why" are important to revise Delilah's story. Unlike the biblical version, when she cuts "every lock of his hair," it is not an act of greed on her part, but an act of love performed by "passionate hands." She simply gives Samson what he wished for. Duffy proves that everything is a matter of perspective. Once we see through Delilah's eyes, her constructed image of *femme fatale* falls flat.

Another sexualized female villain of the Bible that is addressed by Duffy is Salome. She is a mythical figure of the New Testament, famous for having demanded the head of John the Baptist. Although her actual name is not mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew in which the death of John the Baptist is narrated, Salome became part of the collective imagination as a sensual dancer. As Delilah, her sensuality is also portrayed as potentially dangerous to men. Her so-called "weapon" is her own body, which she uses to get whatever she wants. Apparently, through a single dance, Salome is able to convince her stepfather, King Herod Antipas, to order a man's execution.

Salome's story is commonplace in Western narrative; while she is demonized, the King's role in the preacher's death goes unnoticed. The same thing happens to Madame de Merteuil in *Dangerous Liaisons*, by French author Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, first published in 1782. Although she and Valmont are accomplices in their seduction games, only Merteuil is morally punished. In "Salome," Duffy depicts her Salome as a heroine of modern times instead. The poetic voice is that of a self-confident sexual woman who parodies traditional poems in which female beauty is exalted:

I'd done it before

(and doubtless I'll do it again,

sooner or later)

woke up with a head on the pillow beside me – whose? –

what did it matter?
 Good-looking, of course, dark hair, rather matted;
 the reddish beard several shades lighter;
 with very deep lines round the eyes,
 from pain, I'd guess, maybe laughter;
 and a beautiful crimson mouth that obviously knew
 how to flatter ... (Duffy 56)

In another metapoem, Salome views her lover as an object in the same way women have been objectified by male poets throughout history; the difference is her sarcasm for he is only a "head on the pillow" but still "good-looking" and with "a beautiful crimson mouth." Duffy uses a common feature of poetic tradition to mock and discredit this same tradition, thereby placing the woman in the poet's role while the man plays the role of the muse.

Moreover, the "head" is the ultimate muse; a dead one. His kiss is "Colder than pewter" (Duffy 56) and she does not even bother remembering his name: "What was his name? Peter?" (Duffy 56). Salome considers him less as a human being and more as a representation of her ideal of male beauty. Somehow, she is "returning" the Victorian cult of female delicacy to their creators, as acknowledged by Gilbert and Gubar. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, the feminist critics write: "the aesthetic cult of ladylike fragility and delicate beauty – no doubt associated with the moral cult of the angel-woman – obliged 'genteel' women to 'kill' themselves ... into art objects: slim, pale, passive beings whose 'charms' eerily recalled the snowy, porcelain immobility of the dead" (Gilbert and Gubar 25). This means that women were idealized to the point of being considered more interesting as corpses than as people. Most likely, this bizarre romanticization of death is due to the fact that the departed do not age and notably they cannot talk back.

Duffy's *Salome* revenges her literary sisters by assassinating the male muse. It is a symbolic rupture with Western literature, which she confirms in the last stanza: "In the mirror, I saw my eyes glitter. / I flung back the sticky red sheets, / and there, like I said – and ain't life a bitch – / was his head on a platter" (Duffy 57). With heavy irony, she discloses her remorselessness; she simply "flung back the sticky red sheets." Salome regards the situation as a mere bad experience, "ain't life a bitch" she says, for the man who came "like a lamb to the slaughter / to Salome's bed" (Duffy 57). Ironically, "the blighter, / the beater of biter" (Duffy 57), as she "affectionately" refers to her last deceased lover, is compared to a "lamb," an animal traditionally associated with the sacrifices described in the Bible. Salome is the embodiment of male fears of female sexuality, the one who cannot be controlled. She is the presumed "bitch," the creature that turns against the creator. Salome judges and condemns literary tradition for its depreciation of women's sexuality and instead assumes her role as a transgressor, as a woman who dares to defy patriarchal codes of behavior and established gender roles.

Another story of the New Testament revisited by Duffy is the massacre of the innocents. According to the Gospel of Matthew, soon after the birth of Jesus, the Magi, also known as the Three Wise Men or Three Kings, arrive in Jerusalem to pay homage to the newborn. The Magi's visit warns King Herod about the birth of an alleged king of the Jews. For fear of losing his throne, King Herod orders the murder of all male babies in Bethlehem. An angel warns Joseph about the impending massacre and he flees with Mary and baby Jesus to Egypt.

Duffy's "Queen Herod," as the title indicates, is a feminine version of the same story. The poem begins with the visit of three Queens "with gifts / for the King and Queen of here – Herod, me – / in exchange for sunken baths, curtained beds, / fruit, the best of meat and wine, / dancers, music, talk" (Duffy 7). Unlike the biblical Kings, Duffy's Queens bring material

goods for the parents of the newborn, while for the child they have something more valuable: blessings and a warning. The poetic voice acknowledges that: “They were wise. Older than I. / They knew what they knew” (Duffy 8). The androcentric perspective of the Bible is rejected in favor of matriarchy; feminine wisdom is appreciated and recognized by Queen Herod.

Instead of gold, myrrh and incense, the Queens give blessings to the poetic voice’s daughter: “*Grace*, said the tallest Queen. / *Strength*, said the Queen with the hennaed hands. / The black Queen / made a tiny starfish of my daughter’s fist, / said *Happiness*” (Duffy 8). They give the child things that can never be taken from her, such as “*Grace*,” “*Strength*” and “*Happiness*,” tools to live a full life. In addition, the black Queen warns the poetic voice about an upcoming danger:

Watch, they said, *for a star in the East –*
a new star
pierced through the night like a nail.
It means he’s here, alive, new-born.
 Who? *Him. The Husband. Hero. Hunk.*
The Boy Next Door. The Paramour. The Je t’adore.
The Marrying Kind. Adulterer. Bigamist.
The Wolf. The Rip. The Rake. The Rat.
The Heartbreaker. The Ladykiller. Mr Right. (Duffy 8)

These are probably the most interesting lines of the poem. Here, the “*star*” does not announce the birth of a future king, as it does in the Bible. In Duffy’s version “*a new star*” is a warning about the threat posed to women represented by “*Him*” and all his “titles.” Audaciously, Duffy associates baby Jesus, and all men, with a series of male stereotypes. For the black Queen, although men can have different personas, they are in fact all the same. They will all end up seducing and hurting a woman.

Faced with such a menace, Queen Herod states: “*No man, I swore, / will make her shed one tear*” (Duffy 8). The poetic voice is determined to protect her daughter at all costs. She cannot tolerate the possibility of: “*Some swaggering lad to break her heart, / some wincing Prince to take her name away / and give a ring, a nothing, nowt in gold*” (Duffy 9). Queen Herod agrees with the black Queen in the belief that men are threats to women, especially those whom they marry. The husband is the one who will “take her name away,” the woman’s individuality, and replace it with his name as a sign of his ownership over the wife. Deborah Cameron emphasizes that: “What is ‘silenced’ by the naming traditions most readers of this book will be most familiar with – that is, patriarchal ones, in which family names pass down the male line – is women’s history and female ancestry. Where a woman takes her husband’s name at marriage, the continuity of her own identity over time is also disrupted” (26). It is a historical convention perpetuated through marriage in which patrilineal heritage is privileged while the maternal line is ignored.

In order to avoid her daughter’s misery within such convention, Queen Herod makes an important decision: “*Take men and horses, / knives, swords, cutlasses. / Ride East from here / and kill each mother’s son. / Do it. Spare not one*” (Duffy 9). In Duffy’s version, the massacre of the innocents is not ordered by the King’s fear of losing his throne, but by the Queen’s fear of losing her daughter. The poetic voice is not proud of her order, but she knows that extreme attitudes are sometimes necessary: “*We do our best, / we Queens, we mothers, / mothers of Queens. / We wade through blood / for our sleeping girls. / We have daggers for eyes*” (Duffy 10). The choice for the pronoun “we” asserts that the Queen’s battle involves all women. The message is clear: each woman and mother will do whatever it takes to protect one another, even “wade through blood.” Queen Herod’s violence is only an instrument of protection against an androcentric culture that symbolically “kills” women’s identity once they get married by depriving them of their own names and history.

The Bible is a repository of stories in which, in their great majority, women play subordinate roles, with some exceptions such as Queen Esther, Deborah and Abigail. Since Eve, women's subordination is justified on the basis of the sacred nature of the biblical stories. In these stories, women are potentially dangerous to men, as in the case of Delilah and Salome. In her "biblical" poems, Duffy plays with the sacred stories. Delilah is not a cruel seductress, but a woman in love. Salome is not just an anonymous dancer; she is a strong woman who refuses submission. Queen Herod is the one who ordered the massacre of the innocents, not her husband, but for her daughter's sake. Duffy twists the narratives and in this way, she confronts biblical stereotypical and misogynistic images of women.

3.3 – Fairy Tale or “I had the language, girls”

Besides rewriting biblical narratives, Duffy also recounts traditional fairy tales. Being originally a product of oral tradition, the fairy tale genre, according to Steven Swann Jones, “dates back, not just to the Middle Ages or biblical times, but to well before recorded history itself. Oral literature inevitably precedes written culture, and the earliest written records in almost every culture acknowledge the preexistence of fairy tales” (1). So, fairy tales are one of the most ancient genres of literary history because they exist since human beings began to tell stories.

Maria Cristina Martins agrees that fairy tales had a long history until they came to us in the most known works of Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm, besides more contemporary versions such as the Walt Disney's film adaptations (19). Despite being one of the oldest narrative forms, the term “fairy tale” has not been a consensus among scholars. According to Donald Haase:

Despite its currency and apparently simplicity, the term “fairy tale” resists a universally accepted or universally satisfying definition. For some, the term

denotes a specific narrative form with easily identified characteristics, but for others it suggests not a singular genre but an umbrella category under which a variety of other forms may be grouped. (322)

For Haase, the term is not an accurate description of a particular genre since it offers many possibilities of definition. Maria Tatar claims that: “The term ‘fairy tale’ has not served the genre well. Often dismissed as an infantile confection, the fairy tale in fact rarely features the sprightly supernatural creatures so prominent in its name” (4). In fact, the use of the term to refer to a body of texts in which fairies are not always present nor are they the protagonists is problematic. However, despite generating debates, it continues to be used. Perhaps because, as Roger Sale puts it:

The term “fairy tale” is only a convenience since few stories we call by that name contain fairies, elves, leprechauns, or similar creatures. Yet everyone seems instinctively agreed on what the term includes or excludes, even though fairy tales blend easily into related kinds, like myths, legends, romances, realistic folk fables or cautionary tales. “Cinderella”, “Sinbad the Sailor”, and “Hansel and Gretel” are fairy tales, while the stories of King Arthur, Pandora, Patient Griselda, and the Ancient Mariner are not. (23)

Thus, although the term does not live up to the diversity of stories that are named fairy tales, it is a term that most of us are already familiar with and it leaves no doubt in the reader's mind about the kind of story that one will read.

For our purpose here, it is also important to consider the roles of women in fairy tales. Martins observes that few people know that women played a pivotal role as writers in the history of fairy tales. She reminds us that in *Le Cabinet des fées*, a collection of fairy tales published in 41 volumes between the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the majority of the authors were women (23). Among these authors, we single out Madame d’Aulnoy,

Mademoiselle de La Force and Madame de Murat. Usually, when one thinks of women's roles in fairy tales what comes to mind is their role as characters in the stories.

Perhaps in no other literary genre, gender roles are so strongly fixed. Jeana Jorgensen states: "Characters in fairy tales often exhibit strongly gendered behavior. Male protagonists are frequently sent on quests, whereas female protagonists encounter tasks in the domestic sphere" (403). In other words, men usually play active roles and occupy public places. On the other hand, women are the passive ones who wait patiently at home. The submissive nature of princesses, for example, is rewarded by marriage and a happy ending. Women who do not conform to this role are often depicted as witches and evil stepmothers.

Undoubtedly, fairy tales reinforce patriarchal values. Jack Zipes believes that:

It is not by coincidence that numerous feminist critics, women *and* men, feel that the fairy tales of their childhood stamp their present actions and behaviour in reality. There are certain fairy-tale patterns, motifs, and models which constantly arise in our life and in literature which appear to have been preserved because they reinforce male hegemony in the civilisation process. (9)

Somehow, fairy tales reflect and reinforce the patriarchal societies in which they are written. When it comes to girls, from a very young age they are taught to behave "properly" and fairy tales are repositories of moral stories about women's behaviors which are often considered proper in patriarchal cultures, such as obedience, chastity, gentleness, etc. So, it is significant that "Little Red-Cap" is the poem that opens *The World's Wife*. Duffy chooses to revise a tale about a girl who faces danger when she deviates from the path she was supposed to follow. The girl's disobedience has serious consequences for herself and her grandmother. As traditional damsels in distress, they rely on men to save them from the Big Bad Wolf. According to Sandra L. Beckett, Charles Perrault was the first writer to publish the story in

1697 (583). Perrault may have been the first to provide a written version of the story, but he certainly was not the only one.

The Brothers Grimm's "Rotkäppchen" translated into English as "Little Red Cap" is probably the most popular version of the story, first published in 1812. They made changes to Perrault's story because as Zipes states, "for the Grimms the tale was still too cruel, too sexual and too tragic. They felt it necessary to clean it up for the bourgeois socialization process of the 19th century and adapted it to comply with the emerging Biedermeier or Victorian image of little girls and proper behavior" (32). It is thus a tale that has been altered over the years in order to adapt to the moral codes of each period. In contemporary times, the story has been revisited from a feminist perspective by authors such as Angela Carter and Nalo Hopkinson, among others.

In Duffy's version, Little Red-Cap is not an innocent girl but a teenager who is in search of knowledge. She is the one who pays attention to 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!" (Duffy 3). In one more metapoetic poem, Duffy describes, through the eyes of Little Red-Cap, the wolf as somebody proud of his poem. Moreover, he is also vain because he clearly wants to get someone's attention by "reading his verse out loud." Duffy portrays him as a bohemian artist, a wolf who instead of blood stains from hunting has a stain of "red wine." In Duffy's poem, the Grimm's tale is parodied when she writes: "What big ears," "What big eyes." However, in "Little Red-Cap" the girl's remarks are not naïve; they express her sexual attraction towards the wolf. Little Red-Cap sees the wolf as he really is: an intellectually powerful figure. She decides to seduce him because he owns the gift of words, of poetry: "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 3). Far from

being a victim, a “babe” or a “waif,” Duffy’s Little Red-Cap is “sweet sixteen” and she wants to be in control of the poem. The wolf buys her a drink and she says that it is “my first.” We cannot know if she refers to a first drink or a first lover; however, she makes clear her reason for being with the wolf: “Poetry.” She needs to possess the source of the wolf’s power: words.

In Duffy’s metapoem, her self-conscious speaker acknowledges that, historically, poetry has been on the hands of men. In order to learn and eventually surpass the master, Little Red-Cap enters the wood as the wolf’s lover: “Lesson one that / night, / breath of the wolf in my ear, was the love poem” (Duffy 3). Suggestively, her first lesson, “the love poem,” evokes the courtly love tradition, which was an overwhelmingly masculine genre. According to Antony Easthope, in courtly poetry, “the woman is imagined ... as a supreme object. Idealised, placed in a position of apparent superiority to the man’s self-ascribed inferiority, she is fixed and immobilized as passive object of his active desire. The pedestal raises her so that she cannot move” (66). For Easthope, courtly love poems often create a false idea of a supposedly female voice, when in fact the poem is guided by the male point of view.

Thus, love poems traditionally emphasize the male author as the one who has the right to speak as the poetic voice. Little Red-Cap takes time to understand that, but ultimately, she does:

But then I was young – and it took ten years
 in the woods to tell that a mushroom
 stoppers the mouth of a buried corpse, that birds
 are the uttered thought of trees, that a greying wolf
 howls the same old song at the moon, year in, year out,
 season after season, same rhyme, same reason. (Duffy 4).

Once the female poetic voice gains experience, after “ten years,” she realizes that her own story, her own heritage was stolen, “buried.” Now, Little Red-Cap can see that the

“greying wolf” is not as interesting or wise as she imagined him to be since he “howls the same old song at the moon.” While she acquired knowledge, and became a different person, the wolf kept doing the same things “season after season,” writing the “same rhyme.” The wolf is not her master; he is a usurper of her own voice and writing.

The solution found by Duffy's speaker to recover what was taken from her is a radical one: the wolf ought to die. As Jeffrey Wainwright observes: “The wolf in ‘Little Red-Cap’ is the symbol of masculine poetry who must be slain” (50). Indeed, the poem alludes to the centuries in which women poets and writers were excluded from the canon. Only the total rupture between the girl and the wolf can restore and consolidate women’s literary history and tradition:

... 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.
 I filled his old belly with stones. I stitched him up.
 Out of the forest I come with my flowers, singing, all alone. (Duffy 4)

Duffy’s use of the pronoun “I” emphasizes the speaker’s active role, “I took an axe to the wolf,” “I filled” and “I stitched” – a role which in the fairy tale belongs to the huntsman. Then, with only “one chop” her past comes to the surface as she sees “my grandmother’s bones.” Antony Rowland suggests that: “When the poet/wolf’s belly is ripped open, the grandmother, a symbol of occluded women writers, is revealed” (72). I agree that the bones can be read as an emblem of the erasure of women’s voice and presence in Western literary tradition. Once that tradition has been recovered, the girl can finally come “out of the forest” and most importantly “all alone,” without anybody trying to guide her as before. Little Red-Cap is the one who decides what path she wants to take.

Another famous fairy tale revisited in *The World's Wife* is the one about “Beauty and the Beast.” The first written version of the story belongs to French novelist Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve. According to Zipes, Villeneuve’s version was published in 1740 and her story inspired Madame Le Prince de Beaumont to publish her own version of “Beauty and the Beast” in 1756. Beaumont’s story became more popular and gave rise to a play and an opera libretto in the eighteenth century (29). The story of Beauty and the Beast is probably one of the most known fairy tales and unlike “Little Red Cap,” the most famous versions were written by women. Nevertheless, it is a story that often preaches feminine passivity, as acknowledged by Zipes: “the message of Madame de Villeneuve for women is ambivalent. While all the rules and codes in her fairy tale are set by women – there are numerous parallel stories that involve a fairy kingdom and the laws of the fairies – Beauty is praised most for her submissiveness, docility, and earnestness” (29-30). Villeneuve’s story is complacent about patriarchal values since the protagonist is encouraged to be subservient.

In Duffy’s account, the dutiful young daughter who exchanges her freedom for her father’s becomes “Mrs. Beast,” a grown woman who willingly goes after the Beast. Self-assertive, the poetic voice begins setting the tone of the poem:

These myths going round, these legends, fairytales,
 I’ll put them straight; so when you stare
 into my face – Helen’s face, Cleopatra’s,
 Queen of Sheba’s, Juliet’s – then, deeper,
 gaze into my eyes – Nefertiti’s, Mona Lisa’s,
 Garbo’s eyes – think again. (Duffy 72)

For Mrs. Beast, “when you stare into my face” you are staring at the face of other women idealized by Western culture: “Helen’s,” “Cleopatra’s” and so on. Moreover, when you “gaze into my eyes” you are looking at fabricated ideas of female beauty: Mona Lisa,

Garbo and many others. Mrs. Beast means that they are all in fact “myths,” “legends” and “fairytales,” that is, cultural constructs that have imprisoned women from time immemorial. She takes a stand for all female figures created to play a single eternal role; in Simone de Beauvoir’s words “she is the Other” (xix). This means that all these women are in fact one for they represent a constructed idea of femininity.

Mrs. Beast wants to expose the fake images and misconceptions produced by myths and their pernicious influence on women. For instance, she advises us against believing such deliberate misrepresentations: “I could have told her – look, love, I should know, / they’re bastards when they’re Princes. What you want to do is find yourself a Beast” (Duffy 72). The epitome of male provider, the prince who has the money and good looks, is completely devalued by Mrs. Beast. In the original tale, the Beast is transformed into a prince in the end, in line with the “paradigms of fairy tale closure which establish a young girl’s happiness as wholly dependent upon her ability to secure a prince or a husband” (Flanagan 27). Mrs. Beast rejects such patterns; she is not at the disposal of a prince. She is the one who has a Beast at her disposal.

It is much better to love a Beast, as the poetic voice confesses, and, unlike traditional heroines, she does not expect to be provided for:

... Myself, I came to the House of the Beast
 no longer a girl, knowing my own mind,
 my own gold stashed in the bank,
 my own black horse at the gates
 ready to carry me off at one wrong word,
 one false move, one dirty look. (Duffy 72)

Duffy’s Beauty is not an inexperienced young girl, as most fairy-tale heroines usually are, but an emotionally and, most importantly, financially independent woman. The poetic

voice emphasizes her independence when she repeats the words “my own.” Furthermore, her “gold stashed in the bank” and her “black horse at the gates” build an image of a powerful woman who will not tolerate even “one” thing she considers as an insult. As opposed to the traditional tale, she is not given away by one man to another. In fact, she is the one who chooses to be with the Beast. More importantly, she is the one in control: “He had the grunts, the groans, the yelps, / the breath of a goat. I had the language, girls. / The lady says Do this. Harder. The lady says / Do that. Faster. The Lady says That’s not where I meant” (Duffy 73). Mrs. Beast establishes her intellectual superiority since she is the one who “owns” the language, while the Beast has only “grunts,” “groans” and “yelps.” Holding the power of speech, the poetic voice transforms the once mighty Beast into her puppet; she commands him saying: “Do this. Harder” or “Do that. Faster.” Moreover, she controls the sexual act and establishes a clear opposition to the role of the passive and chaste princess of earlier versions.

The poetic voice celebrates not only her victory over the tradition of fairy tales, but also the consequent empowerment of women and their strength to write their own history in a “legendary” card game:

... On my Poker nights, the Beast
 kept out of sight. We were a hard school, tough as fuck,
 all of us beautiful and rich – the Woman
 who Married a Minotaur, Goldilocks, the Bride
 of the Bearded Lesbian, Frau Yellow Dwarf, et Moi.
 I watched those wonderful women shuffle and deal – (Duffy 73)

It is noteworthy that this select group of “beautiful and rich” figures is composed of women who have deviated from traditional standards, as Mrs. Beast herself. Rejecting idealized princes and the norms of heteronormativity, they escape from the simplification of

gender roles disseminated by fairy tales. For “those wonderful women,” the quest for self-fulfillment is more important than pursuing an unrealistic happy ending.

Unfortunately, however, a card game has its losers:

But behind each player stood a line of ghosts
 unable to win. Eve. Ashputtel. Marilyn Monroe.
 Rapunzel slashing wildly at her hair.
 Bessie Smith unloved and down and out.
 Bluebeard’s wives, Henry VIII’s, Snow White
 cursing the day she left the seven dwarfs, Diana,
 Princess of Wales. (Duffy 74)

Mrs. Beast reminds us of the baleful effects of myths in women’s lives. Whether in history or literature, women’s struggle against patriarchy is littered with martyrs: “Eve,” “Marilyn Monroe,” “Rapunzel” and many others, old and contemporary versions. They are a constant reminder of the reasons why re-vision is a necessity, as Adrienne Rich states: “it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society” (11). Rich’s call for re-vision still sounds current and urgent today as when she wrote it in the 1970s. Very often, women still have no choice but to contest and resist patriarchal culture. As the poem suggests, the battle is not won yet.

Fairy tales are among the most popular stories in Western literature. Almost everyone knows the tales of “Cinderella,” “Snow White,” “Little Red Riding Hood,” “Beauty and the Beast,” among others. As in the Bible and in mythology, female characters in fairy tales inhabit a sexist world in which their behavior is controlled and judged often from a patriarchal perspective. While docility and obedience are rewarded, rebelliousness and self-sufficiency are punished. In “Little Red-Cap” and “Mrs. Beast,” Duffy reverses the restrictive rules of fairy tales for women. Her poetic voices resemble the so-called “villains” rather than

princesses, since they have strong personalities like the stereotypical evil female figures such as the witch or the stepmother. Duffy praises their supposedly “bad” behavior and thus replaces the image of the flawless and flat heroine for assertive women who are capable of taking care of themselves. Certainly, this is a lesson Duffy’s readers will not forget.

3.4 – Profane to Survive

The majority of the poetic voices in *The World’s Wife* make a point of showing their anger. They feel frustrated and resentful about how their stories were told since they experienced centuries of patriarchal misrepresentation. In all poems discussed here, Duffy places her speakers in the position of confronting the narratives that produced them. Once these women have the chance to speak up for themselves, they remove the masks they were forced to use. The reader is able to perceive complex characters instead of the simplistic archetypes established for women over centuries.

Straight to the point, the “wives” unveil the roots of gender bias in traditional stories. They contest male authority by portraying their “husbands” as immature, insecure and vain creatures who fail to recognize their own weaknesses. As if they were in a war, the poetic voices work from within, dismantling rhetorically the structure of the Western canon. Eurydice, Salome, Mrs. Beast, and the others, resist domination by subverting the rules of traditional poetry. They are the ones in control of their lives and their poetic creating and the men are portrayed from women’s perspective.

As I discuss in the second chapter, I also believe that Duffy’s poetic voices, like Boland’s, invade the sacred sphere of poetic tradition. Agamben argues that: “The passage from the sacred to the profane can, in fact, also come about by means of an entirely inappropriate use (or, rather, reuse) of the sacred: namely, play” (75). Although Agamben is not discussing literature, it is possible to think of the sacred and the profane in terms of

literary tradition. I believe that in *The World's Wife*, the speakers “play” with the canon, they re-vise or “reuse” those works that have a consecrated status in literary history. Therefore, they commit an act of profanation against poetic tradition.

As I also mention in the second chapter, in the terms discussed by Agamben, transgression is a part of the act of profanation. In her dissertation, Alcione Cunha da Silveira acknowledges that the word “transgression” is historically associated with the biblical creation myth. Adam and Eve disobey God’s law and, in this sense, they are summarily judged and punished as “sinners” who violate the sacred (18). Regarding women’s writing, Deirdre Lashgari observes that:

mainstream arbiters of literary quality have often worked from assumptions unconsciously rooted in gender, class, and Eurocentric culture, with a bias toward authorial distance. For a woman writing from the margins, whose work may clash with these assumptions, acceptance by the literary mainstream too often means silencing a part of what she sees and knows. To write honestly may thus mean transgressing, violating the literary boundaries of the expected and accepted. (1-2)

For Lashgari, since the acceptance of a literary work involves unresolved prejudices, for a woman writer the choices are to conform to such prejudices and thus to deny a part of herself or to confront the system – an act which inevitably leads to transgression. Duffy and Boland have chosen the last one.

When something is not sacred anymore, it can be changed or at least contested. Then it is possible to reclaim a space in literature that was often denied to women in the past. In *The World's Wife*, Duffy manages to profane the canonical narratives in which female characters are often sexualized and objectified. Feminine myths have their stories rewritten and the sacred aura of the canon is called into question. Agamben observes that: “The thing that is

returned to the common use of men (sic) is pure, profane, free of sacred names” (73). It can be argued that to profane is to democratize access to something previously restricted. Duffy returns myths to the use of women; thus, they are free to rewrite and consolidate women’s literary history and tradition.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the present thesis I focus on the revisionist aspect of the works of Eavan Boland and Carol Ann Duffy in order to show how in their collections of poems, *Outside History* and *The World's Wife* respectively, both authors use re-vision as a strategy to build and consolidate women's literary history and tradition. The division of the works in three main themes and the analysis of the most significant poetic strategies of each author aims at validating such arguments.

The main themes I identify in the work of Boland discuss aspects related to womanhood, sisterhood and mythology. The poems I choose to analyze under the label "womanhood" are the ones that focus on women's experiences from their individual perspectives: "The Shadow Doll," "Object Lessons," "We Were Neutral in the War" and "Hanging Curtains with an Abstract Pattern in a Child's Room." In "The Shadow Doll," the poetic voice compares her status as a bride to a Victorian doll forever entrapped in its wedding dress. "Object Lessons" depicts what happens after a wedding ceremony, the routine of marriage, in which a broken mug becomes something to talk about. "We Were Neutral in the War" gives us the perspective of a housewife during a war period and "Hanging Curtains with an Abstract Pattern in a Child's Room" depicts a simple task in the daily routine of a mother. In my view, these poems revise the frequent absence or misrepresentation of women's point view in canonical literary works. The feminine perspectives on different subjects in each of the poems disturb our notions about conventional poetry. Somehow, we are led to confront the way in which standard narratives have often dismissed the plurality of human experiences and especially women's experiences.

The poems I analyze as "sisterhood" poems give emphasis on the affinity between women. In "The Rooms of Other Women Poets," which is probably the most emblematic

poem of *Outside History*, the title echoes Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* discussed in the first chapter. The room in which the poetic voice writes becomes a token of the arduous journey of literary women through history. "The Achill Woman" focuses attention on the bonds that can be formed between women despite or perhaps because of their differences and in "We Are Always Too Late," the poetic voice puts memory into question when she evokes her felling of compassion for a strange woman whom she never had the chance to talk to. These poems look at the way women relate to one another in a different light. As Gilbert and Gubar put it in their analysis of the story of Snow White, mentioned in the second chapter, "female bonding is extraordinarily difficult in patriarchy" (38). Therefore, for a feminist poet like Boland, it is of fundamental importance to transform the preconceived notions women often have about one another.

The theme of mythology is the most evident point in common between Boland and Duffy. However, although both authors address mythology and consequently myths, their approach to the subject differs from one another. As I discuss in the previous chapters, I refer to mythology and myths in this thesis often considering the characters and works of Greco-Roman literature, more specifically the works of Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, and Virgil, *The Aeneid*. The weight of myths in the lives and history of women is the central point in these poems.

In "The Making of an Irish Goddess," by Boland, the famine caused by Ceres in mythology is connected to the experience of motherhood during Ireland's Potato Famine. In "Daphne Heard with Horror the Addresses of the God," the myth of Daphne is like a ghostly presence in a garden, a persistent reminder of the abuses against women that have been naturalized in mythology. "A False Spring" depicts the efforts of a female undergraduate to study the male-dominated world of *The Aeneid*, a task she fails to accomplish. However, she is absolved of any fault by her older self who is then able to comprehend how a traditional

story can create a negative impression in an immature mind. In these poems, the stories of Ovid and Virgil are not rewritten, but rather, their characters serve as catalysts for a re-vision that aims to contrast life stories with traditional stories. Thus, Boland calls into doubt the value of these myths to contemporary society.

Duffy's poems about mythology follow a different path. She is particularly interested in revising Ovid's *Metamorphoses* from the viewpoint of his female characters. It is noteworthy that in *The World's Wife* even when the original character is male, the role of the speaker still belongs to a woman. Duffy invents "wives," a diverse group of ladies who take over their husbands' authoritative voices. In "*from Mrs. Tiresias*," the fine line between gender and sexuality vanishes and the artificiality of such human constructs are ridiculed and dismissed. "Medusa" is not a real monster, but a sad figure paranoid about her husband's faithfulness. The face of monstrosity is nothing but the image of a woman's worst fears reflected in the mirror. "Pygmalion's Bride" reverses Ovid's story and gives freedom of choice to the once laconic statue. In "Eurydice," what seemed like the story of two lovers separated by a tragic destiny is rewritten as the confessions of a bored wife who prefers eternal rest to a lifetime of servitude. Therefore, unlike Boland, Duffy recasts the role of these characters in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, contesting and criticizing the chauvinistic tone of the original stories while she also denounces modern versions of these myths that disguise a much pernicious sexism.

Another main theme of re-vision in *The World's Wife* is the Bible. My focus is on the status of the Bible stories as myths and as sources of inspiration for Western literature. In "Delilah," the poetic voice wants to redeem her reputation explaining that Samson literally asked for what he got. On the other hand, the poetic voice of "Salome" does not seem concerned about her reputation, at least her sexual reputation. She presents herself as a free and voluptuous woman who cut off the heads of several men – an episode which can be read

as an act of revenge against the biblical defamation of hers and other women's names. "Queen Herod" also brings attention to the poetic voice's violent revenge against a culture that conceals female legacy while it legitimizes male supremacy. In her "biblical" poems, Duffy offers the reader a chance to think critically about the role of sacred narratives in the defense of arbitrary power relations.

The third theme I select for my analysis of *The World's Wife* is about fairy tale. Since this is one of the oldest and most popular literary genres in which gender plays a substantial role, as I discuss in the third chapter, I could not ignore Duffy's contribution to the efforts of women writers, such as Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood, among others, who since the 1970s have been revising classic fairy tales as an attempt to somehow deconstruct images of femininity derived from patriarchal discourse and supported by these stories (Martins 38). In "Little Red-Cap," the poetic voice and the wolf engage in a sexual and intellectual relationship. The wolf is a kind of guardian of words whom the poetic voice understands she must defeat to build her own narrative. In "Mrs. Beast," the poetic voice is freed from her customary role in "Beauty and the Beast." Since she is the only one able to speak, she subjugates the Beast to her desires. In both poems, the poetic voices take the power of speech for themselves and therefore they transgress the severe limitations on gender roles imposed by the traditional narratives of fairy tales.

In my analysis of Duffy's and Boland's re-vision, the transgressive aspect of their poems is highlighted. Both authors' transgression is an instrument, a tool, used to achieve a goal. In this case, the purpose of transgression seems to be, paraphrasing Agamben, to restore literature to the free use of women (73). As I discuss in the second and third chapter, for Agamben, this returning of something "sacred" to humanity is to profane (73). In my view, the concept of profanation proposed by the Italian philosopher could be applied to the discussion of the implications of Boland's and Duffy's re-vision. Somehow, both authors

“profane” the canon of Western literature, which arguably has a “sacred” status in literary history.

We have to consider that mythology and the Bible are two indisputable sources of Western literature. Northrop Frye acknowledges that mythology has a “sacrosanct nature” (38) and the same can be argued about the Bible. Suggestively, these two sources are reviewed by Boland and Duffy. In *Outside History*, the poems “The Making of an Irish Goddess,” “Daphne Heard with Horror the Addresses of the God” and “A False Spring” depict myths as pernicious and harmful forces that should not be respected or revered, but neutralized instead. This position reminds us of Agamben’s argument: “Profanation ... neutralizes what it profanes” (77). In *The World’s Wife*, the poetic voices of “Medusa,” “Pygmalion’s Bride,” “*from Mrs. Tiresias*” and “Eurydice” also disrespect the consecrated aura that surrounds these mythical characters and also seek to neutralize what they choose to profane. Furthermore, Duffy dares to profane well-known biblical narratives in “Delilah,” “Salome” and “Queen Herod”.

It is equally relevant to mention that in their re-vision both authors draw special attention to gender issues. However, their strategies to approach this issue are different. In the case of Boland, her poems give prominence to the conflictive relation between women and the private sphere. As I discuss in the first chapter, historically, women have been confined to domestic spaces; therefore, they have primarily played the roles of wives and mothers. Undeniably, this has been a striking distinction between women and men and its effects can still be felt today. In *Outside History*, Boland discusses gender issues from the point of view of mothers, daughters, housewives. Her poems reappraise female experiences in such conventional roles.

In “Hanging Curtains with an Abstract Pattern in a Child’s Room,” for example, no matter how meaningless household chores may seem, every detail has its importance in

building a home. In “Object Lessons,” marriage is also built on domestic details and incidents that can be beautiful to the ones who know how to appreciate them. Even though “The Making of an Irish Goddess” and “Daphne Heard with Horror the Addresses of the God” deal with myths, experiences of mothers and daughters occupy the foreground of these poems. Somehow, Boland gives value to private matters that have been often underrated. If women have been traditionally linked to the private realm, then this realm should be equally or perhaps even more esteemed than the public realm in deference to women’s enclosed history.

In *The World’s Wife*, Duffy takes a more ironic and incisive tone regarding gender issues. Differently from Boland, she often constructs metapoems that place at center stage a questioning about the role of poetry and literary tradition for women. For most poetic voices, men and poetic tradition as male constructs are like enemies that should be interrogated and overcome. The “wives” make no concessions; for them, it is time to redress the balance after centuries of subjugation. In the poems analyzed in the thesis I could observe that Duffy criticizes the androcentric and patriarchal culture that represses female sexuality, autonomy and creativity. The sexism of canonized stories is fearlessly attacked by the poetic voices. For instance, in “Pygmalion’s Bride,” “Salome” and “Mrs. Beast,” feminine desire is openly talked about and enjoyed as something positive instead of being demonized. “Eurydice,” “Queen Herod” and “Little Red-Cap” exalt female knowledge while denouncing how patriarchal discourse suffocates women’s creative power.

I believe the investigation presented in this thesis provides enough evidence to validate my arguments. Although the works of Boland and Duffy present different strategies of revision, their feminist agenda coincide. Both collections of poems, *Outside History* and *The World’s Wife*, explore stereotypical elements of gender discrimination that have been recurrent throughout literary history. In the hands of male writers, women have frequently been objectified, sexualized, sanctified, diabolized; often judged, but rarely absolved. Such

caricatures became crystallized into the canon of Western literary tradition. Women writers had to follow a tortuous path in which they were constantly haunted by simulacra of themselves. Nevertheless, they have arrived at the twenty-first century empowered by the ongoing rescue of a history that had been lost. Revisionist literature of the last decades, such as the one produced by Boland and Duffy, has tackled the idealized constructions of the canon so that we no longer have to fear them. Thereby, I argue that women's literary history and tradition in the hands of Boland and Duffy can finally receive the proper recognition and consolidation they deserve.

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