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Dreadful Dolls: Female Power in Carol Ann Duffy

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ABSTRACT – The article scrutinizes some female characters in four poems of the Scottish *poet laureate* Carol Ann Duffy. Starting from the issue of gender construction and feminist theories, the author then shifts the focus onto the deconstruction and then re-writing of identities. The “Dreadful Dolls” of the title are women struggling to regain control of their bodies, and lives. The author points out how these women change their own body nature and appearance to determine the effects on those who claim power over them. These heroines become aware of the power of their gaze, which they use as a weapon or as a shield. They even manipulate their attire in order to reveal or, contrarily, to hide something about themselves. In this work, the author presents women performing the re-writing of their identity and power.

KEYWORDS – Carol Ann Duffy; poetry; women; feminism; gender; the gaze; power; myth; tattoos; performance.

Peel off the napkin
O my enemy.
Do I terrify?
(Sylvia Plath, “Lady Lazarus”)

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to scrutinise Carol Ann Duffy’s technique of characterisation, which shows the power of her heroines in relation to their fearsomeness. The Scottish *poet laureate* has a unique voice in British poetry; she speaks a new language dedicated to feminist issues, to communication and identity, which is rich in symbols, metaphors, and wonderful imagery. She succeeds in showing us that through the process of re-writing themselves, these women become empowered: my aim is to demonstrate that their own deconstruction releases them from the idealised perfect female – the doll.

Dolls are toys, models of human beings: you can play with them, you can manipulate them. But dolls can also be collectibles, not meant to be played with, but only to be looked at. Yet, women reject such passive definitions, so I will move both ways along the axis *woman* ↔ *doll*: by deconstructing and reconstructing themselves women show they are their own *puppeteers*, and if they are dolls it is because *they* have decided to be so. As a consequence, they are actively transforming themselves and are not just passively reduced to objects for the gaze. Indeed, the title of this article is due to my understanding of women as specifically self-objectified but also self-de-objectified: as Baudrillard states in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, women turn themselves into dolls as they deconstruct their body and rewrite it as an object for their and the other's gaze ([1976] 2017a, 131); therefore, by doing so, they regain control of their body.

The poems analysed here are from the collections *The World's Wife* (1999), *Mean Time* (1993) and *Feminine Gospels* (2002). In "Pygmalion's Bride", "Eurydice" and "Medusa" (1999) the focus will be on the power these women get from their monstrosity, while in "Adultery" (1993) and "The Map-Woman" (2002) Duffy emphasises the crucial importance of clothes – hiding or revealing a fragmented body – and the gaze. The heroines work actively on structuring themselves, thus *enacting* dreadful dolls: they switch themselves on and off at will, they change their position between gazer and object-of-the-gaze. They adjust their appearance, therefore either objectifying themselves into "dolls", or, conversely, taking on a life of their own. The transition, the process of deconstruction from woman to doll (and vice versa) is a liminal spell during which a woman is structurally decomposing or rotting, and yet empowered: female power derives precisely from woman's disposition to metamorphosis and her rejection of demarcation.

It is worth starting the "autopsy" of our dolls by considering Elisabeth Bronfen's words:

Given the fact that the sight of Woman is doubly coded – as object of desire and object of fear – it becomes clear why portraits satisfy. Constructed rhetorically like the fetish, the art object works by denying the existence of the very thing it refers to, by masquerading as entirely self-sufficient as a non-referential sign, severed from materiality. Because it is a double, not the thing itself, it can give the viewer a forbidden sight and shield from its dangers. (2006, 123)

In this contribution, Bronfen treats both death and femininity as "images" or "otherness". The image the woman provides does not possess the living

menace, agency, but only the power to enchant the beholder. However, women in this study do possess agency, they refuse to be objectified by men, and be only an object of desire, they also want to be an object of fear. In fact, real women are terrifying because, unlike men, they experience menstrual bleeding, and they can host a new life in their womb. Women's bodies generate fear because they are changing and productive, and precisely by rejecting boundaries and defying passive objectification women gain the same terrible and elusive quality of spectres and monsters: "Women have been identified primarily through the body which, throughout history, has been associated with monstrosity" (Mulvey-Roberts 2016, 106).

Monique Witting highlighted the role of language in the building of the active "I", the speaking subject. As Butler explains when talking about Witting's "subversive bodily acts": "This privilege to speak 'I' establishes a sovereign self, a center of absolute plenitude and power; speaking establishes 'the supreme act of subjectivity'. This coming into subjectivity is the effective overthrow of sex, and, hence, the feminine: 'no woman can say *I* without being for herself a total subject – that is, ungendered, universal, whole'" (1990, 117). Therefore, women need to be either subject or self-objectified, never just passively objectified. In fact, they kick against this fetishisation and take revenge through their "rebirth". This rebirth, their own rhetorical decoding and re-writing, rewards women with their fearsomeness, and the gaze has key importance in demarcating the binary, the axis along which women can mould their own identity.

That identities are a product of discourse and language, and therefore are built iteratively, has already been claimed (by Foucault and Derrida, amongst others), however, what I want to highlight here is that by rearranging themselves and defying slavish objectification, not only do women construct their identity, but they also become empowered as they prove they have control over themselves. In her influential book *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir said, "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one" ([1949] 2011, 14), and because they have to *become* women, they constantly need to deploy their power of transformation. A woman is born with female genitals, and yet it is not from those that she gets her power, or her "femininity". We are going to see that it is the courage to dismantle and re-write their identities that allows Duffy's women's empowerment.

2. THE POWER OF MONSTROSITY

All the poems in *The World's Wife* (1999) are dramatic monologues, which gives women the opportunity to speak for themselves, and, more importantly, to tell their own version of their story¹. In "Pygmalion's Bride" the protagonist is a statue that comes to life. The poem is rich in imagery concerning the art of sculpting and the sea, intensified by a majestic use of rhymes and alliterations. Here the protagonist is the famous sculpture loved by Pygmalion, but she does not live as a passive plaster object; as a matter of fact, she tells us: "I lay still / as though I'd died", "didn't blink" and "played statue" (2011, 192). This information is precious as Pygmalion's Bride is telling us that she *is* not a statue, in fact she "played statue". She performed. This presents the heroine as a performer: Pygmalion thinks she is his work of art, he thinks his hands moulded her, while it is she who is interpreting the role of the statue, she is actively building the character of her own script.

While Pygmalion "looked for marks" left by his hands and kisses on her skin she deliberately "showed no scratch, no scrape, no scar"; the Bride is even capable of controlling the effects of his actions on her (193). Her body reveals nothing. His actions have no consequences on her body because she has a hold on it and she does not allow him to have power over her.

After the many gifts and sweet words of Pygmalion, sick and tired of all the sentimental attention she is getting from him, the Bride eventually decides to "change tack": the metamorphosis here is from a deaf, dumb, and stiff doll, harassed by Pygmalion's "clammy hands" (192), to a real woman who suddenly "got hot, got wild, arched, coiled, writhed" and changes her body state, as now she "grew warm, like candle wax" and "was soft, was pliable" (193). In a similar way, another work of art also comes to life: Angela Carter's marionette Lady Purple from "The Loves of Lady Purple" actually kills her creator and master by sucking air from his lungs, and, interestingly, this female puppet too

did not seem so much a cunningly simulated woman as a monstrous goddess, at once preposterous and magnificent, who transcended the notion she was dependent on his hands and appeared wholly real and yet entirely other. Her reactions were not so much an imitation as a distillation and intensification of those of a born woman and so she could become the quintessence of eroticism, for no woman would have dared to be so blatantly seductive. (Carter 1988, 31-32)

¹ Duffy's poems will be quoted from Duffy 2011 unless otherwise stated.

Since it is believed that a born woman does not “dare” to be so seductive, it is necessary to show that she actually can be so. This is possible through transformation: by moving between doll/object and woman/subject females demonstrate their power over themselves.

When Pygmalion’s Bride comes to life, all her terrifying power explodes and subdues her sculptor. A dead, beautiful, and harmless doll turns into a powerful moaning woman. She takes this active step against the objectification he was subjecting her to. Pygmalion’s Bride does not want to be just a work of art, she wants to possess precisely the living threat that is neutralized in the process of metamorphosis into a picture. She is regaining the power that has been taken from her: the statue is showing her creator-voyeur that, even if he thinks he holds the power over her existence because he created her, he is wrong. The Bride says that, at the climax of the intercourse, she “screamed [her] head off – all an act” (Duffy 2011, 193). Inevitably the poem ends with Pygmalion’s leaving: “And haven’t seen him since. Simple as that” (*ibid.*).

Pygmalion’s Bride rejects being only a representation of a woman, perfect and unchanging. If it is true that, as Baudrillard states, “Stucco transfigures all this incredible material disorder into a single new substance, a sort of general equivalent for all the others, accruing a theatrical prestige, since it is itself a representative substance, a mirror of all the others” ([1976] 2017b, 73), then she is going back to that Dionysian disorder and chaos instead, to life.

In Ovid’s myth Pygmalion “Abhor’d all womankind”, but, after creating his sculpture, he falls in love with the perfection of his work and desires that it could be alive. Eventually, thanks to Aphrodite, the statue becomes a living woman, and they fall in love and have a baby. The opposite reaction in Duffy’s work is demonstrative of the fact that Pygmalion was only able to love a “dead” harmless woman of his own conception instead of a real one, scary in her reactions. The statue turns the table on Pygmalion showing her transformative power and her terrible living strength. Therefore, the sculptor experiences terror which is associated with the woman’s liveliness: “Pygmalion, an early worshipper in the long tradition of poetic and artistic idealisation of the feminine, cannot cope with the fleshly, sexual reality: simple as that” (Wainwright 2003, 51).

Similarly to Pygmalion’s Bride, Eurydice, from the eponymous poem, speaks for herself and tells the story of Orpheus’s descent into Hades from her own point of view. Eurydice describes Hades as “a place where language

stopped / a black full stop, a black hole / where words had to come to an end” (Duffy 2015, 283). The reference to language, and then later in the poem to poetic composition, has the specific aim to bring attention to the construction of identities and relationships as based on linguistic signs. In the Underworld she was structurally decomposed and she adds “it suited me down to the ground” (*ibid.*) as she was not defined by linguistic terms.

Duffy’s Eurydice refuses to be Orpheus’s muse; indeed she would rather be dead: “I’d rather speak for myself / than be Dearest, Beloved, Dark lady, White Goddess etc., etc. // In fact girls, I’d rather be dead.” (284). Eurydice re-tells the story claiming that her version is the real one: she actually preferred to stay in the Underworld of Hades – a dead subject – rather than being a living object. Her being dead gave her a safe place from a kind of stalker. Orpheus imprisoned Eurydice within “his images, metaphors, similes, / octaves and sextets, quatrains and couplets, / elegies, limericks, villanelles, / histories, myths...” (285) and he even started his journey to Hades to bring her back to life, she was just a “prize” (284). For this reason, she confesses “I did everything in my power / to make him look back” (285).

In this poem, being looked at has a positive connotation for Eurydice as it means that she is free to be herself, as Avril Horner said: “She is finding her way from being seen as an object to becoming a subject” (2003, 115). Eurydice uses Orpheus’s weakness to make him turn: selfishness. By saying “Orpheus, your poem’s a masterpiece / I’d love to hear it again” she obtains the desired effect, “he was smiling modestly / when he turned / when he turned and he looked at me” (Duffy 2015, 286). The tone of this poem, like “Pygmalion’s Bride”, is definitely sarcastic and impudent. Yet, like Medusa – our next powerful woman – it is at a high cost that Eurydice gets her freedom from Orpheus: death. Even if she was already dead, she then had the chance to go back to the world of the living, yet she refuses such option in order to prove that she is not a passive object.

These two poems seem to be depictions of “artist-muse” relationships, therefore autobiographical allusions to Duffy’s ten-year relationship with the male poet and artist Adrian Henri, a relationship that produced works of art like *Beauty and the Beast* (1977). As Michelis and Rowland explain, this collaborative work “fits into a tradition of feminist re-writings of nursery rhymes and tales, which includes figures such as Sylvia Plath and Angela Carter” (2003, 7). Indeed, apart from being a poetic influence on Duffy, Plath had had a similar relationship with her poet husband Ted Hughes – though Duffy did not share her tragic fate. Moreover, Plath chose the dramatic monologue

form for “Lady Lazarus” like Duffy did for her female protagonists (indeed among them also “Mrs Lazarus”). Angela Carter too created stories with tough female characters in the collection *The Bloody Chamber* (1979). The female protagonists of Carter’s stories share with Duffy’s women the transformative power and the urgency to enfranchise from subjugation through a certain kind of metamorphosis. It will be shown later in this paper how this connection with both Plath and Carter is visible through more specific intertextual references.

The next powerful woman is “Medusa”, the famous snake-headed character in Greek mythology. Carol Ann Duffy uses vivid imagery here to present this female monster, and especially to show the way and the reasons why she has become such a monster. The first two stanzas describe the beginning of her transformation: the poem opens with “a suspicion, a doubt, a jealousy” that “grew” in her mind, and these feelings and passions “turned” her hair into snakes, “as though my thoughts / hissed and spat on my scalp” (Duffy 2011, 183). The transformation starts from the inside, from her emotions. She turns herself into a Gorgon because of her feelings, and sacrifices her beauty to obtain the power of transforming the things she sees into stone and, by doing so, she gets her revenge. As Jeffrey Wainwright says she “is another female figure whose power and tragedy are inextricably bound together” (2003, 53), in fact it is a double transformation that takes place, by becoming ugly she becomes powerful, and, in particular, it is her gaze that attains power.

In Ovid’s myth, the danger for onlookers comes from their gazing *at* Medusa, even if usually gaze is always both-ways: it is her ugly face and snake-hair that, once looked at, turn the beholder into stone. In this poem, however, the movement is from the inside to the outside and this movement is further emphasised when the protagonist explains how *she* turns everything into stone, *she* is the gazer. The creation of her monster-self begun in her mind continues and leaks out of her eyes. The effects of her monstrosity thus become visible and are described by Duffy in an ironic way: “I glanced at a buzzing bee, / a dull grey pebble fell / to the ground. I glanced at a singing bird, / a handful of dusty gravel / spattered down” (Duffy 2011, 183). As Dylan Evans explains (2006, 73), “whereas Sartre had conceived of an essential reciprocity between seeing the Other and being-seen by-him, Lacan now conceives of an antinomic relation between the gaze and the eye: the eye which looks is that of the subject, while the gaze is on the side of the object, and there is no coincidence between the two”. In this poem Medusa is the subject, so the eye, because it is precisely her eyes that have the power to turn

things into stone rather than her being seen, “with her deadly paralysing gaze, allegorises the femme fatale, who encodes the perils of sexual autonomy and aberration” (Mulvey-Roberts 2016, 106).

Finally, she “stared in the mirror. / Love gone bad / showed me a Gorgon” and Medusa ends her blaming discourse to her “Greek God” with a resentful tone: “Wasn’t I beautiful? / Wasn’t I fragrant and young? // Look at me now” (Duffy 2011, 184). This last verse is clearly a threat and a promise: if he looks at her, he will be turned into stone by her gaze. If it is true that her jealousy turned her into a monster, then it is also true that her petrifying power of revenge dwells precisely in the acknowledgement of her feelings and now horrible aspect.

The poem can be compared with Plath’s aforementioned “Lady Lazarus”: like Lady Lazarus, whose “sour breath will vanish in a day” (1965, 6), also Medusa’s “bride’s breath soured” (Duffy 2011, 183) but, while the former’s ugliness derives from her cadaveric body coming back to life, the latter’s derives from her own feelings of jealousy. Lady Lazarus just wants to die but cannot because a sort of Nazi Doctor raises her from the dead again and again, so she decides to turn her death-and-rebirth into a show, making herself an object for others’ voyeuristic gaze. By contrast, Medusa does the exact opposite, she gives up her beauty to get the power to terrify, her thoughts have become hissing snakes and her eyes weapons: “There are bullet tears in my eyes. / Are you terrified? // Be terrified.” (*ibid.*). Lady Lazarus asks her audience “do I terrify?” (Plath 1965, 6) only to reassure the spectators later that her ugliness will eventually dissolve. Medusa and Lady Lazarus share their terrifying appearance and their threatening disposition: while Medusa makes use of ugliness as a weapon against Perseus, Lady Lazarus gets rid of it: she will recover and be smiling again. Like Eurydice, Lady Lazarus probably wanted to stay dead, but since she will be brought to life again and again, she decides to use her rebirth as a reminder of her potential threat: “Herr God, Herr Lucifer / Beware / Beware. // Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / and I eat men like air.” (Plath 1965, 9).

3. THE POWER OF GETTING DRESSED AND UNDERESSED

The next poem was published in a different collection, *Mean Time* (1993), and is titled “Adultery”. First of all, even if the protagonist were a man in

Duffy's intent, this analysis takes it that she is a woman. The poem is gender-neutral and focuses on the protagonist's appearance; she is presented mostly through her adulterous actions and fragmented body.

The poet starts the first stanza with reference to eyes/glasses, a suggestion for the reader to wear sunglasses while it is raining. The dark glasses serve the purpose of protection not from the sunlight but from being discovered as an adulteress. This is probably what the adulteress is doing, she is not protecting herself from an external danger, but from an internal one, the possible revelations of her gaze. The adulteress is objectifying her own gaze as a potential mark of her betrayal, and therefore she is hiding it, she will see everything "through a bruise" which is guilt "A sick, green tint" (2011, 124). In the second stanza, the point of view shifts to her hands/gloves, "new gloves, money tucked in the palms, the handshake crackles" (*ibid.*). All the references to the woman's actions are conveyed through the medium of her appearance, a simulacrum of her unfaithfulness. The poet states brilliantly: "you are naked under your clothes all day, slim with deceit" (*ibid.*), we could take it for granted that one is naked *under* one's clothes, but in this case Duffy emphasises the adulteress' nakedness as her guilt, and her clothes are the cover, the mask she is hiding under. Gloves, sunglasses, clothes prevent her from being naked *therefore* guilty to herself, as well as to the others.

Detachment and cinematic presentation are the techniques Carol Ann Duffy makes use of to convey this woman's unfaithfulness, her "life which is crumbling like a wedding cake" (124). Her body and actions are portrayed through parts and items of clothing, and through telegraphic phrases and broken lines. In his work, Rowland studies Duffy's poem in relation to the urban context and explains that "the list of amorous signs in this poem consists of fetish objects associated with the lover, which form an integral part of the erotic contemplation of the past" (2003, 69). Every action is distanced both from its agent and object through metonymies and synecdoches: "a voice in your ear telling you how you are wanted" (Duffy 2011, 124) instead of "s/he tells you" and "a hand on your thigh tilts the restaurant" (125). A wonderful metaphor of her body is used in the eighth and ninth stanzas: "selfish autobiographical sleep / in a marital bed, the tarnished spoon of your body / stirring betrayal, your heart over-ripe at the core" (*ibid.*). The selfish autobiographical sleep contrasts with the marital bed she is sleeping in, highlighting her guilt, the image of a body as a spoon conveys the motion of ongoing movement of cheating and sexual activity, while her heart is over-ripe only at the core, so, again, as her covered body, it is not visible from the outside.

The invisibility of her guilt, hidden in the core and covered up with clothes, reinforces the feeling of disloyalty experienced by her cheated partner. So, in this poem the female monster is trying to hide her monstrosity, her guilt. The gaze here is a double-edged sword: eyes can be turned on “for a stranger who’s dynamite in bed” (125), therefore serving alluring purposes, but they can also betray the cheater. Eyes can even cry after the “slicing of innocent onions” (*ibid.*). The body can be protected by gloves and clothes, but the heart will still be rotting, “overripe at the core” (*ibid.*). This poem conveys the malaise of a woman who is feeling guilty and therefore is anxious of *appearing* guilty. Here the power of estrangement and that of getting dressed are used not to gain subjectivity, but to hide adultery and guilt. Yet, in distancing herself from what she has done, the cheater “appears as a kind of damaged, but all-knowing, and therefore empowered, urban lover” (Rowland 2003, 69).

Very peculiar is “The Map-Woman” first published in *Feminine Gospels* (2002), a collection where Duffy “chooses simply, for the most part, to ignore men” (Michelis 2003, 27). In this poem Duffy explores the female body through a map: the eponymous character has a map on her skin as a “birthmark, tattoo” (Duffy 2011, 213). It is not just any map, though, it is the map of the town where she grew up: her skin is her story. The visibility of the woman’s life is the main theme of the poem, as she tries to conceal her skin from people’s gaze. Her rebellion is not specifically against men, but against the imprisonment of her appearance.

Duffy generates a strong sense of oppression by mentioning all the items of clothing the woman usually has to wear in order to cover up her tattooed life, and by the fact that she acts as if she really needed to conceal it:

when she went out, she covered it up
with a dress, with a shawl, with a hat,
with mitts or a muff, with leggings, trousers
or jeans, with an ankle-length coat, hooded
and fingertip-sleeved. But – birthmark, tattoo –
the A-Z street map grew, (*ibid.*)

The adversative conjunction in the middle of the sentence emphasises the contrast between the desperate effort of the woman to conceal her map and the unavoidable widening of it. As a second skin the map grew with her, recording all the woman’s experiences on her skin. The tattooed map on her body can be, of course, a metaphor for the revelations of her body. The poet might be talking about a tattooed woman, as well as about a woman who is

simply feeling the burden of her ugly or sensual body, therefore she covers it up. Yet, the tattooed skin might also stand for the ageing skin of a middle-aged woman: the poet clarifies that “Only her face was clear, her baby-blue eyes unsure / as they looked at themselves. But her body was certain” (215). Usually eyes age differently from the rest of the body, they keep those features that characterise the individual throughout all its life, so what she needs to hide is the rest of her ageing body.

As Nicoleta Colopelnic argues (2011, 94): “the refusal to display the tattooed skin can be regarded as the refusal of being reduced to a visual object”. The skin is considered the gate through which our bodies get in contact with others, therefore, if skin is language, the tattoo is narrative (90). In this poem the woman’s tattooed body is the narrative of her life; by covering the tattoo she is trying to prevent the beholders from reading her. Unfortunately, it seems an almost impossible task, even though she tries to escape from her skin, from her past: “She took a plane” but “the map seethed / on her flesh. She spoke in a foreign tongue. / The map translated everything back to herself” (Duffy 2011, 216). She is a prisoner of her own body. She even tries speaking a different language but her body unmasks the trick and translates everything. It is time that hopelessly records everything she does on her body.

Then, in a last attempt to get rid of her “birthmark”, the woman goes back to that town, to her past. Nevertheless, once there, she feels displaced, confused by the changes that affected the town she thought she knew “like the back of her hand”; “something was wrong” so she goes back to her hotel and “she stripped” (*ibid.*): the woman surrenders and goes to bed.

The poem finale is the most important textual segment of the poem as a “monstrous” transformation takes place in her sleep: in a wonderful magical metamorphosis “her skin sloughed / like a snake’s” (*ibid.*). The tattooed monster/old woman moults and leaves her slough on the floor: this is made of metaphorical gloves from her hands, stockings from her legs, camisole from her chest, socks from her feet, thong from her groin, and finally a bra from her breast. What is described is, therefore, an undressing. Now she has a new skin: the old one “was her own small ghost, / a shroud to be dead in, a newspaper for old news / to be read in, gift wrapping, litter, a suicide letter” (217) and she carelessly leaves it there, on the floor.

Yet this moult is not painless, for “her skin itched, / like a rash, like a slow burn, felt stretched, as though / it belonged to somebody else” (*ibid.*). We discover the map did not disappear, now it is simply not visible as it has started to record everything again in her bones, as a sort of horrible osteopo-

rosis, “deep in the bone / old streets tunnelled and burrowed, hunting for home” (*ibid.*).

The “Map-Woman” feels already objectified and stigmatised as tattooed/ageing and she wants to get rid of her superficial “skin”, to show the real version of herself. The ongoing autonomous widening of her tattoos means that her constant movement and frenetic life are being recorded, like wrinkles. She wants to break free precisely from this haunting recording of time. In this case, the woman considers her skin a weakness, as it is as readable as texts are, the same way the woman in “Adultery” tries to conceal her gaze. Both women’s bodies are “open books” to their lives. In this case the terror comes from within the women themselves. It rises from the very possibility of being discovered and read through the bespeaking signs of their bodies.

The “Map-Woman” skin metamorphosis recalls Angela Carter’s short story “The Tiger’s Bride” in her collection *The Bloody Chamber* (1979). In this version of “Beauty and the Beast”, originally written by Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont, Beauty’s father lost her to the Beast at cards. After knowing the Beast, whose aspect resembles that of a tiger, and getting undressed for his simple pleasure, eventually Beauty falls in love with him. One day she enters his room, he starts purring violently, starts licking her with his tongue “abrasive as sandpaper”, she thinks he “will lick the skin off” her, and indeed “each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of shining hairs” (Carter [1979] 2006, 75). Beauty here undergoes a transformation, yet it can be argued that it is her love that peeled her old skin to give her a fur, and not the Beast’s licking. Animalisation, as a form of metamorphosis, is liberating, especially if it is the woman who initiated it. By becoming an animal, a woman disposes of her body to prevent its possible objectification and becomes empowered. The transformation is not a passive experience, on the contrary, it is carried out by women themselves.

The “Map-Woman” however, shows uneasiness with her skin so, when she finally gets rid of it, the new one feels not like hers, but something born out of uneasiness and anxiety. This is why the map does not abandon her, it simply moves beneath. While in “Adultery” guilt and rot are inside and need to be hidden, in “The Map-Woman”, since clothes are ineffective and not enough, the woman needs to bury her malaise in her bones. She might have magically turned into a young/untattooed woman, but she is old/tattooed inside. Her map is still there. Her new skin is not a liberation: it substitutes clothes in the covering up of her freshly mapped skeleton.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it has been shown how it is metamorphosis that empowers women and characterises their femininity. In the poems of *The World's Wife* “there is something Bacchic, Dionysian, that is shared by Medusa, Circe, Eurydice, Mrs Tiresias and the bride of Pygmalion. All represent what men fear: the released, primarily sexual energy of the Dionysian band” as Wainwright pointed out (2003, 53). Indeed, we have seen that Pygmalion’s Bride rejects being a statue, tractable and obedient, created in order to be contemplated, so she turns herself into a sexually demanding living doll. Eurydice, like Pygmalion’s Bride, fights against her psychological imprisonment in Orpheus’s poems, but she decides she wants to stay dead, instead of being a simple muse doll. Medusa, on the other hand, specifically reacts to jealousy and the fear of being cheated on: rather than leaving any chance to betrayal, Medusa turns herself from beautiful woman to assassin doll. The woman in “Adultery”, on the contrary, has to face her own corruption and unfaithfulness, she has to fragment her own body, to hide it from others’ eyes, but at the same time she uses those fragments to seduce: she is a broken sex doll. Similarly, the “The Map-Woman” fights against being seen as tattooed/old, so her metamorphosis is a covering-up which proves unsuccessful; she changes her entire skin, but she is still an ageing doll.

I will borrow Gina Wisker’s words (2016, 150) to state that, exactly like female vampires “problematising received notions of women’s passivity, nurturing, and social conformity”, our Dreadful Dolls also “destabilise such comfortable, culturally inflected investments and complacencies and reveal them as aspects of constructed gender identity resulting from social and cultural hierarchies”. So the power of Duffy’s female protagonists derives from rioting, from the possibility to change themselves, from the ability to keep transfiguring: though not always successful in their objectives, these dreadful dolls certainly prove to be tough women.

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