

**The Cartography of Confinement/Escape:  
Crossing Over from Margin to Center in  
Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife***

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**Introduction**

This paper aims at reading the poetic cartography of confinement/escape as shown in Carol Ann Duffy's 1999 poetry collection, *The World's Wife*. Moving from the margin to the center – through the technique of foregrounding and backgrounding – leads to questioning the concept of space(s) in Duffy's poems. Jeanette Winterson explains that the poems in *The World's Wife* are “about women behind the scenes, women behind the throne, women behind history” (2015, n. pag.). Instead of listening to the male celebrities, in myth and history, we listen to their women's stories in their own spaces that allow them such a voice. “This headstand, the world turned upside down, gives us another look at history through her-story: the “other”; the angry and the ignored, as well as the sure-footed and sexy” (2015, n.pag.). Where the women move, where they go/stay, how they carve safe spaces for themselves away from the normative dominant patriarchal system, and how they perceive the concept of “home” are the guidelines which could generate an interpretive reading of Duffy's poetry collection.

The first official holder of the position of a Poet Laureate in England was John Dryden in 1668. Since that year until 2009, the post was held by men. In 2009, Carol Ann Duffy (1955–present) became the first woman to hold the post. Duffy was born in Glasgow in 1955. She attended Stafford Girls' High then studied in the University of Liverpool, obtaining a degree of Philosophy in 1977. She rose to fame after publishing her first poetry collection *Standing Female Nude* in 1985. In 1999, Duffy published *The World's Wife*.

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Written in the same year that Duffy lost the title of Poet Laureate to Andrew Motion, the poems in *The World's Wife* came out bolder and louder. Characterized by “a roistering, wickedly spiced burlesque” (Forbes 2002, n. pag.), this collection endows most of its women figures with voice. How Duffy depicts maps in her poems which the characters use to navigate their way from margin to center is thus the focus. This poetic cartography will be analyzed through examining the places where the characters are positioned and consequently their ability/inability to find their voice.

Cartography is the art and science of graphically representing a geographical area, usually on a flat surface such as a map or a chart. It may involve the superimposition of political, cultural, or other non-geographical divisions onto the representation of a geographical area (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*). This paper concerns itself with poetic cartography; that is, how maps of different spaces/places are portrayed through the use of poetic devices. The importance of self-location is expressed by Robert Tally in his article, “On Literary Cartography: Narrative as a Spatially Symbolic Act”:

The experience of being in the world is one of constant navigation, of locating oneself in relation to others, of orientation in space and in time, of charting a course, of placement and displacement, and of movements though an array of geographical and historical phenomena (*New American Notes*).

That the concept of space has come to occupy a remarkable place in literary studies is a fact. Towards the middle of the 20th Century, the term “the spatial turn” has surfaced in the field of humanities, coming out as an interdisciplinary field of study. Studying space(s) and place(s) has pertained to various academic fields other than geography as well. It has flourished significantly within the over-arching realm of Cultural Studies; creating bonds between gender and post-colonial studies, identity politics and politics of representation.

The work of [Michel] Foucault, [Henry] Lefebvre, [Michel] de Certeau, and [Paul] Virilio, which newly emphasized the power relations implicit in landscape under general headings like ‘abstract space’, place, and ‘symbolic place’, interpreted through new spatial metaphors like “panopticism” have become highly significant during the 60s, 70s and 80s of the twentieth century constituting the above mentioned spatial turn (Guldi, *University of Virginia Library*).



This noticeable position of the study of space has dictated the need to investigate such spaces in Carol Ann Duffy's poetry collection; particularly the presence on the margin and the possibility of crossing over to the center.

Since the margin is a form of space, the analysis will make use of bell hooks' "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness" to look at the nature of the margin on which the female personae in Duffy's poems may or may not use as a space of resistance; thus their ability to cross it over to the other side. Bell Hook's approach in "Choosing the Margin as a Space for Radical Openness" will help trace the movement of the marginalized figures in Duffy's selected works. Whether the space(s) in the poems are lost, forbidden to tread on, hidden or made clear will be explored in the light of the characters' motion from the center to the margin or vice versa. If they do move, the possibilities of creating alternatives to substitute the normative choices they are left with will be looked at. hooks observes that,

our living depends on our ability to conceptualise alternatives, often improvised. Theorising this experience aesthetically [and] critically is an agenda for radical cultural practice. For me this space of radical openness is a margin - a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a "safe" place. One is always at risk. One needs a community of resistance. (1989)

hook's assertion that "spaces can be real and imagined [,] spaces can tell stories and unfold histories. Spaces can be interrupted, appropriated and transformed through artistic and literary practice" (1989, 23) will be traced in Duffy's poetry so as to unfold its meanings through its use of the spatial and if it is accepted and/or appropriated by the figures inhabiting it.

Additionally, Hannah Arendt's concept of 'the space of appearance' will be employed to ascertain the ability or inability of the characters to express their voice. For Arendt, the space of appearance stands for that space "where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things, but to make their appearance explicitly" (Arendt 1998, 198 – 199). This public space of appearance is a result of the third category of human activity classified by Arendt, namely, action. According to the definition of this space of appearance, its existence will be investigated in Duffy's poems so as to hunt for the characters' state of confinement or the ability to cross over to the safety of having a voice. The space of appearance is governed by two main activities which are speech and action. Therefore, if one does not have a voice



and is not engaged in active action then he/she is to be excluded from the public space, thus becomes confined and helpless. The inability to speak and act leads to a state of non-existence in the free realm of appearance. If the others do not hear one's voice or do not see one perform an action then one does not exist. This space must be recreated by means of action. After determining whether the conditions in which the poems' personae are contextualized would allow them such a space of appearance, it becomes easier to decide if they lack power as they will be deprived of agency and thus not engaged in action.

In *The Sage Dictionary of Cultural Studies*, Chris Barker asserts that, "it is necessary to grasp human activity as distributed in space since human interaction is situated in particular spaces that have a variety of social meanings" (2004, 186). The spaces that Duffy situates her women figures in either imprison them or allow them to cross the limitations and turn to active agents. If they are denied their agency, they cannot escape the margin. Agency can be understood to mark the socially determined capability to act and to make a difference. The agent "is a being with the capacity to act, and 'agency' denotes the exercise or manifestation of this capacity" (*Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*). That the validity of agency is connected to the location of the agent is not to be denied. The presence of the individual in the center or on the margin or even on the margin's margin determines how an/a active or passive agent he/she is.

The women figures who manage to cross over from margin to center in *The World's Wife* transcend the borders of gender limitations, thus exemplifying the notion that agency is not to be determined by a certain gender. In her article, "What is Gender Performativity?", Gergana Stoyancheva explains the problematic notion that "gender is a stable identity from which everything else falls into places and the individuals that fail to comply with one of the two categories are labelled as abnormal and unnatural" (2). This in turn hinders the capacity to act, thus being an agent. Duffy's women who cross over do not comply with what gender acts dictate, embodying what Judith Butler's asserts in her essay, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory":

Gender is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy. Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure. (1988, 531)



Therefore, to break free from the constraints of patriarchy, these women – making full use of the spaces Duffy situates them in – are not confined within the limitations of their gender as female. “In this sense, gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed” (Butler 1988, 519).

Women’s agency should not be defined according to their relation to men. A long time ago, Simone de Beauvoir has stated that a woman “is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other” (2010, 26). Since man is the subject, then accordingly a woman becomes the other, the weaker, the passive object. Against that, most of the women in *The World’s Wife* do not fit into that frame. They undergo a process of transformation and cross over from voicelessness to voice. There is action involved, which surpasses that of the male figures and is not defined by their presence. Thus, Duffy portrays active agents rather than passive followers.

The complex interplay between center and margin provides the figures with new spaces that engage them in processes of motion and transformation. Crossing the margin therefore becomes such a crucial step to attain the above mentioned agency. In his article, “The Subject and Power”, Michel Foucault draws attention to the fact that studying the margin can yield an understanding of its power which actually helps shed the light on the forms of former oppression. This is carried out by:

taking the forms of resistance against different forms of power as a starting point. To use another metaphor, it consists of using this resistance as a chemical catalyst so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, and find out their point of application and the methods used. Rather than analyzing power from the point of view of its internal rationality, it consists of analyzing power relations through the antagonism of strategies. For example, to find out what our society means by sanity, perhaps we should investigate what is happening in the field of insanity. (Foucault 1982, 780)

Duffy’s figures, therefore, move in order to find their freedom after being oppressed or they lose their battle and remain in shackles. In his article, “Spatiality’s Mirrors: Reflections on Literary Cartography”, Robert Tally mentions that



storytellers survey the territory they wish to describe, they weave together disparate elements in order to produce the narrative, and these elements may include scraps of other narratives, descriptions of people or places, images derived from first-hand observation as well as from secondary reports, legends, myths, and inventions of the imagination. (2011, 561)

Similarly, Duffy employs myth and history in order to shed light on the characters of those forgotten wives. The women tell their stories and express their opinions in different significant spaces/places, the poem being the first space where – for example – we can hear Mrs. Darwin’s or Mrs. Faust’s voices; telling their own stories and that of their husbands. The majority of the poems in *The World’s Wife* speak of the victory of the women figures who are either powerful or have gone through a process of transformation so they end up reborn, thus crossing from margin to center. The minority of the poems, however, display some sort of confinement of the women whose voices get lost.

One way of establishing power and highlighting the agency of women who were forgotten in history is the use of the dramatic monologue; a form which has always characterized Duffy’s poetry. The dramatic monologue “is a type of lyric poem that was perfected by [19th century Victorian poet], Robert Browning. A single person, who is not the poet, utters the speech that makes up the whole of the poem, in a specific situation at a critical moment” (Abrams 1999, 70). In cases of crossing over from margin to center, the dramatic monologue acts as an adequate form as it provides the space needed for that transformation. Even though some monologues do not feature active agents, there remains the form as a given metaphorical space for the reader to acknowledge the plight of the speaker.

Audre Lorde says: “I write for women who do not speak; who do not have verbalization because they were so terrified, because we are taught to respect fear more than ourselves” (2004, 72). Similarly, Duffy’s women figures who manage to cross from margin to center by having such a voice are a witness to what Lorde asserts. It is this idea of being articulate, loud and heard that endows the voice of the world’s wife with power. The fear which Lorde mentions – which is well established through history – is primarily gone in most of Duffy’s poems and replaced by a new story of the female speaker. Thus, we do not see a traditional scared Red Riding Hood but a Red Riding Hood who killed the wolf and “filled his old belly [unapologetically] with stones” then calmly “stitched him up” (Duffy 1999, 4). We see another agent, Delilah, who states that “...with deliberate, passionate hands/I cut every lock of his hair” (Duffy 1999, 29),



speaking of Samson whom she took his power away purposefully as she boldly says.

Mary Beard, in “The Public Voice of Women”, talks about the “first recorded example of a man telling a woman to ‘shut up’; telling her that her voice was not to be heard in public. I’m thinking of a moment immortalized at the start of the *Odyssey*.” (*London Review of Books*) Beard then tells of an incident where Telemachus, Odysseus’ son was involved:

The process starts in the first book with Penelope coming down from her private quarters into the great hall, to find a bard performing to throngs of her suitors; he’s singing about the difficulties the Greek heroes are having in reaching home. She isn’t amused, and in front of everyone she asks him to choose another, happier number. At which point young Telemachus intervenes: ‘Mother,’ he says, ‘go back up into your quarters, and take up your own work, the loom and the distaff ... speech will be the business of men, all men, and of me most of all; for mine is the power in this household.’ And off she goes, back upstairs. (*London Review of Books*)

It was this defining moment in one of the oldest surviving texts in Western literature where the fact of silencing a women’s voice could not be denied. Penelope is confined within the physical space of her home in Ithaca, while Odysseus is away roaming the world and encountering different adventures, thus different spaces. At the same time, Beard’s example sheds the light on Penelope’s metaphorical confinement as well, namely, her being overshadowed by the presence of a strong dominant male voice, that is of her son. Beard elaborates,

What interests me is the relationship between that classic Homeric moment of silencing a woman and some of the ways women’s voices are not publicly heard in our own contemporary culture, and in our own politics from the front bench to the shop floor. It’s a well-known deafness. (*London Review of Books*)

Duffy rewrites the myths of the women figures she mentions in *The World’s Wife*, the likes of Mrs. Faust, Red Riding Hood and Medusa. Penelope – opposed to the Penelope shut up by her son – in Duffy’s poetry chooses her work over waiting for Odysseus. She changed to be “self-contained, absorbed, content/most certainly not waiting” for the return of a man who “sailed away/into the loose gold stitching of the sun” (Duffy 1999, 70 - 71). Even when the woman figure



in her poetry collection does not manage to push herself to the center, she draws the attention that it is because of the over-powering male figures hindering the process of crossing that border.

### **Confinement: The Failure to Escape**

Digging the spaces which Duffy inserted all through her poem “Thetis”, one can figure out the goddess’ power which unfortunately fades away resulting in confinement. Thetis is a Greek mythological figure who, due to her superpowers, could change shapes. Her marriage to the hero Peleus was one celebrated event during the Trojan War, a marriage which produced the legendary hero, Achilles.

Thetis announces her power early on in the first stanza: “I shrank myself/to the size of a bird in the hand/of a man” (Duffy 1999, 5). Despite the shape-shifting power, the first line is a foreshadowing to the shrinking of such a woman “in” the hands of a man implying his domination. To underscore the effect, Thetis says: “Sweet, sweet, was the small song/that I sang” connoting a voice; a voice that was loud “till I felt the squeeze of his fist” (1999, 5). Thetis then tries to turn into a divine bird: the albatross. In a clear allusion to Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”, the scene moves to an open space, namely, the sky which supposedly connotes freedom:

Then I did this:  
shouldered the cross of an albatross  
up the hill of the sky  
Why? To follow a ship. (Duffy 1999, 5)

A repeated pattern follows where Duffy shocks the reader. Every time Thetis attempts to take the shape of an animal or any entity within its natural habitat, there is a male figure which hinders her trials. Becoming an albatross is not a successful attempt despite the open space: “But I felt my wings/clipped by the squint of a crossbow’s eye”, again mocking Coleridge’s mariner whom she accuses of a squint. The snake is “a big mistake”: “Coiled in my charmer’s lap/I felt the grasp of his strangler’s clasp at my nape”. The sense of entrapment is implied through the repeated use of the preposition “in”. The bird is “in the hand of a man” and the snake is “in” the charmer’s lap. The lion – the fiercest of animals – also does not survive: “my golden eye saw/the guy in the grass with the gun” (Duffy 1999, 5). The “mermaid, me, big fish, eel, dolphin/whale, the ocean’s opera singer” come to an end because “over the waves the fisherman



came/with his hook and his line and his sinker” (1999, 6). The same pattern continues until the defining moment when she marries Peleus.

Her body which is her vehicle of control allows her to change to a woman hungry for love. But that is the last change she could undergo. According to Greek mythology, Peleus received help from Proteus – an early prophetic sea god – in order to overcome Thetis’ ability to change form. Every adventure of the brave female shape-shifter turns to a pitfall because of male figures, then marriage takes place as the final pitfall: “Then my tongue was flame/and my kisses burned, but the groom wore asbestos” (Duffy 1999, 6). Asbestos is a highly resistant mineral to heat; so it acts as the antagonist to the wife’s burning passion. The state of confinement reaches its peak when she is no longer in control of her most precious gift, namely, her body. She is no longer a shape-shifter, she adapts to her new life as a wife then mother: “So I changed, I learned/turned inside out – or that’s/how it felt when the child burst out” (1999, 6). Not only did she lose her power because of the confining space of marriage, but her voice, deeds and ability to take action will no longer be valid because of the legendary male figure that has just appeared on stage, her son, Achilles. Thus, Thetis is losing the space which allows her to appear, to exist. Thetis is no longer an active agent so that she can engage in action. Giving in to the limitations of being a wife and a mother, the woman figure here will remain confined, and worse marginalized by the birth of one of the most popular male Greek heroes. It is the same situation in *The Odyssey* – mentioned above by Mary Beard – where Penelope found herself silenced and overshadowed by her son Telemachus whose status was rising and who thought that “speech will be the business of men, all men, and of me most of all; for mine is the power in this household” (*London Review of Books*).

The other voice which is obliterated as a result of falling into the grip of a husband is that of Mrs. Darwin. In *The World’s Wife*, Duffy’s poems are all named after the women of very famous men to shed the light on those lives that were eclipsed by the popularity and success of the male figures. Mrs. Darwin has only the space of her diary in which she writes one entry which comprises the whole poem:

7 April 1852.

Went to the zoo.

I said to Him –

Something about that Chimpanzee over there reminds  
me of you. (Duffy 1999, 20)



A stunning short length of the poem speaks of the density of the subtle truth between its lines. Despite the piercing humour found in the wife's remark, it cannot be overlooked that Mrs. Darwin wrote her entry in 1852, seven years before Charles Darwin published his seminal book *On the Origins of Species*; the book which made him one of the most influential figures of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The simple remark documented by the woman carries the whole idea of evolution which suggests that creatures can be the descendants of other older creatures. Then what happens to the space? It is no longer on the map. It shrinks, leading to the disappearance of the voice that once inhabited it. Later, history only remembers the more powerful figure, namely, the husband. Mrs. Darwin remains confined within the margin of 'history.'

Another woman who finds herself confined within a space which does not allow her a voice is Mrs. Sisyphus. Duffy presents a woman whose greatest contribution is seeing her husband push a stone up the hill: "That's him pushing the stone up the hill, the jerk" (Duffy 1999, 21). All what the woman can do is express her anger towards a man who is ignoring her and their marriage because he is too invested in his job; a modern dilemma which a lot of stay-at-home women complain of. The husband fails to carry out ordinary daily tasks; so Mrs. Sisyphus goes on complaining: "What use is a perk, I shriek/when you haven't the time to pop open a cork/or go for so much as a walk in the park? He's a dork" (1999, 21). The woman's marriage which should be a pleasant experience is no longer a space where she can feel comfort or love. Duffy employs imagery as Mrs. Sisyphus describes her husband's work ethic. Even though the stone rolls back down the hill; "what does he say? Mustn't shirk/keen as a hawk/lean as a shark/Mustn't shirk!" (1999, 21).

Instead of being a keen husband or a lean lover, Sisyphus compares himself in two similes to a hawk and a shark; two predators that make use of all their instincts to push the stone up the hill. The result is a gigantic indifference which invades the space of the wife; typical of the marriage boredom which attacks a lot of modern couples. While the husband makes use of his own 'space of appearance' as a result of his free action, the wife in contrast says, "But I lie alone in the dark" and in a more significant confession: "My voice reduced to a squawk/my smile to a twisted smirk/ while he, up on the deepening murk of the hill/he is giving one hundred per cent and more to his work" (1999, 22). The woman's voice is "reduced". The choice of diction is to be underscored. Her voice is reduced to a "squawk" which is typical of fowl such as ducks or geese. Such birds are not predators as hawks or sharks; such birds are prey. The woman



is confined “in the dark”. A lonely wife with a reduced voice and a feeling of a prey, Mrs. Sisyphus is an abandoned woman on the margin of a failed marriage.

Hannah Arendt aims at highlighting the importance of action and the danger of giving up on this action – which is the highest form of practicing freedom in her triad of human activity – and giving in to theories; that is when theory overcomes and controls application. To elaborate more, Arendt speaks of the unique distinctness of humans and asserts that,

speech and action reveal this unique distinctness. Through them, men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct; they are the modes in which human beings appear to each other not indeed as physical objects, but qua men. (1998, 176)

In other words, it is through action which is the pillar of creating the space of appearance, mentioned before, that a figure can be an active subject rather than a passive object. Since the chances given to marginalized women so that their voice can come out are controlled by patriarchy which represents a hegemonic culture, their ideas, potentials and activities are confined. Therefore, these women are left with no space for these activities to crystallize. Thus, there will be no proper chance for speech and action – especially action – as illustrated through the plight of Thetis, Mrs. Darwin and Mrs. Sisyphus. The confinement does not seem to diminish. Thetis is confined within the shadow of her legendary son. Mrs. Darwin is confined within the fame and success of her husband. Mrs. Sisyphus is confined within the boredom of a failed marriage.

In her article, bell hooks defines home as “no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and ever-changing perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference” (1989, 36). Therefore, the margin created is not used as a space of discovery. Those women in the previously analyzed poems cannot feel this space as a shelter or a home, nor can they use it as a space of resistance or escape it. They cannot cross the margin, they remain motionless.

### **Escape: Crossing the Border**

In “Little Red Cap”, Duffy retells the story of Red Riding Hood. The little girl undergoes a journey from childhood to maturity. “At Childhood’s end...it was there that I first clapped eyes on the wolf” (Duffy 1999, 3). The first mentioned space is the one where innocence ends. The girl crosses that line dividing innocence and experience. The woods, which is “a dark tangled thorny



place”, is the realm of the wolf personified as a male poet. He is very fluent and lures her in by reciting poetry. Then she wakes up in his lair with torn clothes.

The wolf does not eat the girl, but she is raped time after time as ten years pass by. He keeps her as a prisoner by means of books, poetry and offering her knowledge. However, she uses that well. She steps out of the margin which is “his heavy matted paws” at some point. Her last ounce of naivety is lost when she searched for an innocent white dove which flew right into his mouth: “One bite, dead” (Duffy 1999, 4). The death of the dove symbolizes the end of all that was once naïve. After killing the wolf calmly with an axe, Red Riding Hood says, “I filled his old belly with stones. Stitched him up/Out of the forest I come with my flowers, singing, all alone.” (1999, 4) Stepping victoriously out of the place representing the margin, namely the dark forest, which had imprisoned her for ten years, she comes out with “her” own flowers. The possessive pronoun implies strength and emphasizes the cross over or the leap from the dark forest to its borders. Additionally, she is singing, which implies voice and free will. For the second time, she crosses the borders, yet this time empowered.

Similar to Red Riding Hood is Mrs. Faust. We learn that Mrs. Faust was unhappily married to a man who sold his soul to the devil, hence the famous story of Dr. Faust. The wife tries to escape her failing marriage. She is always “on the move” in an attempt to escape her feelings of frustration. She says, “I went my own way/saw Rome in a day...went to China, Thailand, Africa/returned enlightened” (Duffy 1999, 25). The map drawn here is of many countries and the woman is moving. Duffy makes use of repetition as a stylistic device so as to stress the idea that this woman is making the best use of her time and the result is becoming “enlightened”. Faust dies and his wife reveals the secret she had only known all through their married life: “I keep Faust’s secret still – the clever, cunning, callous bastard/didn’t have a soul to sell” (1999, 27), a fact which cancels what has been established in history. This woman now has a space of her own, no longer confined within a marriage with a selfish, cunning man whom she knew had many affairs during his lifetime.

Pygmalion’s Bride is another figure who makes a full use of the margin. She turns it to her own map of tactics. During the time she had been a cold statue, she feels Pygmalion was crazy about only one thing: touching her. She was an inanimate object, dehumanized, with no space of appearance, no action, and no agency. “He kissed my stone-cool lips...He brought me presents..pearls and necklaces and rings...He let his fingers sink into my flesh” (Duffy 1999, 51-52). The humiliation becomes clear as he is only interested in her external cold beauty which he thought would satisfy his masculine hungry desires. In order to get rid



of such a figure who had always objectified her, she decides to “act”. She changes and turns into a real living woman, “grew warm, like candle wax/kissed back, was soft” (1999, 52). The fact that it was her decision, her trick, not his will that changed her, is noteworthy. Finally, Pygmalion leaves: “simple as that” (1999, 52). He fell into the trap of boredom that she willingly set. A statue on the margin of humans, then a woman on the margin of a man, then a trickster who manages to get rid of her jailer makes Pygmalion’s bride a figure crossing over from that objectified margin to a living active center.

One other example is of the famous Medusa who reveals that: “A suspicion, a doubt, a jealousy/grew in my mind/which turned the hairs on my head to filthy snakes” (Duffy 1999, 40). Now we know a reason why Medusa looks – as perceived through history – ugly. It is because of being confined within the love of a man leading to stress and doubt that ate her up. It is an imprisoning space which left her no chance of growing. “My bride’s breath soured, stank/in the grey bags of my lungs”; a powerful metaphor by Duffy shows the bride whose breath – which is supposed to be sweet and perfumed – turns rotten with a stinking smell. The breath itself is confined within her grey lungs. Yet, Medusa escapes, again using her being thrown or dumped on the margin as her ultimate weapon. It is that moment when she orders, “Be terrified” that she starts crossing the margin. This is done by having a choice to embrace the super power that she is discovering about herself, namely, turning creatures to stone. Medusa here is close to every female who falls in love then has doubts because of her lover’s many affairs. She realizes that she is not enough. Yet she grows strong. She turns everything to stone once she gazes at it. She wonders about the time she was beautiful and why her man did not see her that way. Consequently, she chooses to make him pay the price of his infidelity: “And here you come with a shield for a heart/and a sword for a tongue/and your girls, your girls/Wasn’t I beautiful? Wasn’t I fragrant and young? Look at me now” (1999, 41). The reader is left with the final stunning reverse of the male gaze. He looks at her, thus turning into stone indicating that Medusa has crossed over from the margin of defeat to the center of avenging herself.

Finally, Duffy presents a transformation of Penelope, Odysseus’ wife. It is well known how Penelope waited for her husband who sailed away and left her for ten years fighting off the unwanted suitors who competed for her hand in marriage. In Duffy’s poem, Penelope engages in two main actions which she narrates. One is waiting eagerly for her husband to come back, then the other is gathering “cloth and scissors, needle, thread/thinking to amuse” herself (1999, 70). Penelope here speaks of her trick to fend off the suitors by sewing a burial shroud for Odysseus’ father then undoing it every night as she “played for time”



(1999, 71). The woman discovers a new space different from being confined within a marriage to a man who sailed away for many years. At first, Penelope says, “I looked along the road/hoping to see him saunter home” then “Six months of this/and then I noticed that whole days had passed/without my noticing” (1999, 70). Adapting to the husband’s absence, the wife allows herself to discover the beauty of being dedicated to another action, namely, sewing and creating something new. She sews the shape of a little girl “running after childhood’s bouncing ball” and “a walnut brown for a tree/my thimble like an acorn/pushing up through umber soil” (1999, 70). The simile in this line implies her growth, or may be a whole rebirth just like an acorn pushes up and creates a space for itself in such dark soil.

The space created by embracing her sewing – thus engaging in action freely and willingly – allows Penelope a voice that admits: “...and lost myself completely/in a wild embroidery of love, lust, loss, lessons learnt” (1999, 70). The result is that she is picking out “the smile of a woman at the center/of this world, self-contained, absorbed, content/most certainly not waiting” (1999, 70). That is Penelope’s triumphant crossing over from margin to center. She states plainly that after discovering the worth of work, she is right now at the center not on the margin of her heroic husband whom she is no longer waiting for. The end of the poem intensifies the discovery. Odysseus is finally home one day but she says, “I licked my scarlet thread/and aimed it surely at the middle of the needle’s eye once/more” (1999, 71). Penelope becomes so invested in her work that she receives the once longed for return of Odysseus with an indifferent yet confident gesture, namely, resuming her needle work diligently and “surely”.

It is apparent that the complete process of crossing over is achieved when the above women figures act upon their free choice, thus being transformed from a silent object to a subject with a voice. bell hooks says, “Being oppressed means the absence of choices” (1989, 5). If one has a choice, then one is gaining power, and is moving one step closer to the center. Judith Butler asserts that “gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly” (1988, 531). In the light of those two assertions, Thetis, Mrs. Darwin and Mrs. Sisyphus – in the first three poems – do not have such a choice and there is an unfortunate surrender to the limitations of their gender. The first one gets entangled in marriage and motherhood, the second is completely overshadowed by a revolutionary achievement belonging to her husband and the third remains helpless due to her husband’s apathy. In Thetis’ case, her husband received help from the gods in order to strip her of her super power of shape-shifting. The oppression is double-fold here. A woman with power should be contained by



both worlds: the world of men and the divine world of the gods who seem to approve of her surrender to her stronger mortal counterpart, namely, her husband. Confined women lose their space. Consequently, their status is defined in relation to the more powerful masculine grip in which they are confined in. Thus, exemplifying what Simone de Beauvoir has mentioned, namely, the man “is the Subject; he is the Absolute.” and “she is the Other” (Beauvoir 2010, 26).

“Moving, we confront the reality of choice and location” (hooks 1989, 15). Location matters when it comes to having a voice. It leads to empowerment, which pertains to Hannah Arendt’s concept of power which is “actualized only when word and deed have not parted company” (Arendt 1998, 200). By crossing the borders, the women in the second part of the previous analysis find ways to practice the politics of action; they engage in both speaking and acting. Planning, mapping, and acting upon free choice, they manage to actively move from margin to center. Based on where the majority of the women figures in Duffy’s *The World’s Wife* are, they determine their own choice because they emerge in Hannah Arendt’s “space of appearance”. They not only have a voice but they act upon it as in the examples of Mrs. Faust, Red Riding Hood, Pygmalion’s Bride, Medusa and Penelope. Then Duffy provides them with the poem itself as a free space for their voices to be heard, crossing over the normalized historical accounts of their celebrity male spouses.

The process of crossing over takes place when these figures move/escape from a failed marriage to roaming the whole world, from childhood’s naive lair to freedom outside the forest, from a statue within the hands of its sculptor to the freedom of individuality, and from the confinement of a stereotype of evil to the liberty of embracing/accepting power. Even when the first three figures, Thetis, Mrs. Darwin and Mrs. Sisyphus, fail to cross the border from margin to center, they still have the dramatic monologue as a space to voice out their story. Mrs. Darwin had a diary too.

This draws attention to the nature of the margin that still can be used as a tool of resistance even if one cannot cross it. Thetis, Mrs. Darwin and Mrs. Sisyphus document their stories reminding the reader that it is the confining grip of a more powerful male figure that is the reason why they are overlooked and denied their agency. Despite being on the margin, one cannot help but remember their voices. “Our struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting” (hooks 1989, 19). So the margin works; both by being on it or away from it. “For me this space of radical openness is a margin - a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a “safe” place. One is always at risk. One needs a community of resistance” (hooks 1989, 19). This also highlights the intertwinement between voice and the margin being a space for radical openness.



Because of its nature as being a “profound edge” as hooks calls it, it gives an opportunity for such woman figures to document their dilemma of confinement. The act of documentation is what serves their struggle and helps the reader to remember their plight.

Eventually, through tracing the spaces that Duffy gives her women figures in *The World's Wife*, one is bound to say that by having a voice; the resistance of the marginalized is guaranteed to keep going. Duffy puts those women figures on the map of the world after they have been forgotten. They now have a voice. So they cross from the margin of history to the center of the readers' awareness. Borders are not easy to define. Thus, Duffy advocates women empowerment through the process of motion.

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