

PEARLS, DIAMONDS AND COINS: FASHIONING THE BELOVED'S BODY IN CAROL ANN DUFFY'S POETRY

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Carol Ann Duffy inherits and reworks many of the codes and conventions of canonical love poetry; from her position as an acclaimed contemporary poet interested in giving voice to marginal and dissident subjects and transforming poetry from within, she has explored the connection between the adornment of women's bodies and the politics of looking. This article proposes to interpret pearls, gems, jewellery and gold in three poems from different stages of Duffy's career as part of a work of revision and critique of canonical love poetry. Drawing from feminist research on the love sonnet, Petrarchism, and the blazon, I discuss how Duffy portrays ornaments, and fashion more broadly, as "a liberating and repressing part of our lives" (2004: xi).

KEY WORDS: Carol Ann Duffy, love poetry, fashion, body, blazon.

Perlas, diamantes y monedas: modelar el cuerpo amado en la poesía de Carol Ann Duffy

Carol Ann Duffy hereda y transforma numerosos códigos y convenciones de la poesía amorosa canónica; desde su lugar como una renombrada poeta contemporánea que se interesa por dar voz a los sujetos marginales y disidentes y en transformar la poesía desde adentro, Duffy ha explorado la conexión entre la ornamentación de los cuerpos femeninos y las políticas del mirar. Este artículo propone interpretar las perlas, las gemas, la joyería y el oro en tres poemas de diferentes etapas de la trayectoria de Duffy como parte de una labor de revisión y crítica hacia la poesía amorosa canónica. A partir de investigaciones feministas sobre el soneto amoroso, el Petrarquismo y el *blazon*, analizo cómo Duffy representa los adornos, y la moda en un sentido más amplio, como "una parte liberadora y represiva de nuestras vidas" (2004: xi).

PALABRAS CLAVE: Carol Ann Duffy, poesía amorosa, moda, cuerpo, *blazon*.

Carol Ann Duffy's appointment as Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom, a position she held from 2009 to 2019, was celebrated as a concluding moment in the normalization of female authorship in British poetry. In the words of fellow British writer Jeanette Winterson, "When the news came that [Carol Ann Duffy] had smashed through 341 years of male bardship, it was an incredible moment for women, as well as for poetry" (2009). At the same time, questions were raised about her relation to the dominant poetic tradition and specifically to an institution that had, until then, remained closed to diverse voices. To date, Duffy has been the only woman, the only Scot, and the only LGBT author to be elected Poet Laureate. Her position as

a representative of national poetry offered a unique chance for drawing attention to a body of work that foregrounds experiences that were rarely portrayed in canonical literature, such as motherhood, women's sexuality, and queer desire. In addition, Duffy's poetry is known for blending traditional forms —sonnets, sestinas, dramatic monologues— with the informal diction of contemporary life and references to popular culture. It is difficult to deny that the literary field has been transformed by the poets who addressed these overlooked subjects and criticized the biases in publishing, reception, and criticism; as Jane Dowson recalls, when Duffy won the National Poetry Competition in 1983, “women poets were still being described condescendingly as ‘poetesses’” (2016: 17). The designation of Duffy as Poet Laureate, twenty-five years later, speaks of a cultural shift in which “woman” and “author” (a concept that connotes an authoritative voice) may be finally reconciled, and not defined as antithetical.

While I acknowledge that “the author” has been a contested figure for feminist literary theory, and that recent poetry by British women (and by British poets of all genders) is not only diverse, but also “dazzlingly rich in terms of language, image, and emotional range” (Winterson, 2009), I do believe that revisions and negotiations concerning women poets' engagement with language, form, and literary conventions are still active. The lyric mode implies particular challenges for women who, like Duffy, write both from inside and against a tradition. Here I am referring specifically to love poetry written primarily in English, but also to a counter-tradition, a history of women poets' appropriation of and conscious engagement with poetic conventions. Jo Gill provides a useful example of how women have reshaped the love lyric: “Looking at Renaissance poetics [...] the courtly love rituals, declarations of love, and exchange of love tokens characteristic of the male-authored poetry of the age become in the work of some of their female contemporaries rather more than rhetorical flourishes. Often it is the reversal of agency which renders these poems striking and thus successful” (2007: 87). The lyric mode's focus on immediacy, on a speaker's inner world and subjective perception, is not unproblematic: Gill states that “the necessity of establishing a separation between poet and lyric voice has been particularly urgent for women” (2007: 86), given that a prejudiced reading of their work could disregard the artistic merit of a poem by claiming that it is based on unaltered personal experience. Nevertheless, if it is precisely female experience that has been erased or distorted, then its expression in poetry opens possibilities for unsettling the categories of public/private, demonstrating that the lyric mode is not detached from the social world, and placing women's subjectivity (though not necessarily the poet's) at its centre. Clair Wills summarizes the ongoing nature of this debate:

Arguably, the representation of an inner life in lyric poetry, through personal address or solitary meditation and reflection, has always also been a mirror of social and cultural forces. But, given the nature of the poetic tradition and the history of poetic practice, this mirroring has also been gendered. This has led some contemporary women poets to seek to “reclaim” the lyric. (2000: 119-120)

Duffy’s love poetry has been a frequent object of critical attention, but it must be kept in mind that her approach to the genre is not politically neutral: “Highly regarded for her many love poems, Duffy has, however, spoken of the difficulties of working in a genre that, perhaps more than any, depends traditionally on a division of power between lover and beloved, male and female” (Rees-Jones, 2010: 30). Often, the power arrangements and sexual politics of canonical love poems have to do with the ability to speak and to voice one’s desire, and also with playing the role of the observer or negotiating the terms under which one is to be observed. Susan Rubin Suleiman elaborates: “Having power *versus* lacking it, speaking *versus* keeping silent, acting *versus* supporting action, existing for one’s self, as subject, *versus* existing for the other, as object. These are familiar oppositions, and in a sense they are all subsumed by a single other one: male *versus* female” (1985: 7). Against the backdrop of these considerations, in this article I aim to consider Duffy’s response to the conventions and dominant patterns of the love poem by focusing on pearls, gems, and gold. I read these elements as motifs that simultaneously embody the poet’s connections to canonical poetry as well as her revision of its biases and silences. I argue that it is possible to reclaim elements of a lyrical tradition centred on men’s vision and almost invariably heterosexual desire (Petrarchan sonnets, blazons, images of the poet’s mistress going to sleep, aubades) and to re-contextualize these elements in poems that openly depict women’s desire for other women, or uncover the power asymmetries in writing about passion and beauty. In other words, nods to canonical poetry coexist with Duffy’s effort to reshape the love poem and to craft a space where other bodies and other desires can be represented.

In “Warming Her Pearls”, published originally in *Selling Manhattan* (1987), a pearl necklace is used to evoke unvoiced queer desire; it is an object that dramatizes the tension between two worlds and two bodies whose contact is closely policed and regulated. If the poem is located within a lyrical scheme that stages a subjective discourse defined by unfulfilled desire, the pearl necklace marks a clear link with Petrarchan amatory poetry and its centuries-long influence on Anglophone poets. “Warming Her Pearls” might be conventional in its depiction of the beloved as a cold, distant figure whose aloofness brings pain to the speaker, but it simultaneously challenges these conventional schemes by granting a central place to non-heterosexual female desire. Moreover, these nods to the Petrarchan lyric are

integrated into the dramatic monologue, an apt form to give voice to marginal subjects. In the hands of a woman poet, the dramatic monologue is also useful for drawing attention to the performative character of femininity; as Rees-Jones explains, “one important reason why the monologue may appeal to women as a form may come from an already pervasive sense of the everyday artificiality of the construction of women’s role” (2010: 18). “Standing Female Nude”, published in the 1985 poetry collection of the same title, serves as a case in point. In this poem, one of Duffy’s most famous, an unnamed sex worker speaks back and mocks the artist who has hired her to sit for a nude portrait but is unable to relate to her except as an object (Duffy, 2015: 45-46). Challenging the artist’s instructions to “be still” and “don’t talk”, the speaker successfully avoids the motionlessness and muteness that underlie the female nude.

In “Warming Her Pearls”, a maid speaks about her enthrallment with the woman she works for; she wears the lady’s pearl necklace during the day to warm it and thinks about the scent and the heat enclosed in the gems. However, the affirmation of a working-class woman as a speaking subject is complicated by the power relations in which bodies are enmeshed: the poem is centred on her as a desiring subject, but she is also subjected, captive, as it becomes clear through the symbol of the necklace. There is, moreover, another kind of bondage in the poem: by foregrounding bodies that blush, feel cold, fan themselves, leave traces of scent, sigh, and burn in longing, “Warming Her Pearls” examines the intimacy of living with/as a body, whose appetites and needs “tie” us to materiality; the body, in the words of Susan Bordo, “that is *inescapably* ‘with me’”, a presence that is “‘private’, ‘near’, yet ‘opaque’” (2003: 2). This opacity stems, in part, from the fact that any attempt to understand what is “natural” about the body takes place within language and culture. For instance, the two poems I have mentioned examine how the unclothed body is always seen and read through cultural frameworks; in “Warming Her Pearls”, when the lady undresses and places her necklace aside, her body nevertheless remains adorned and embellished, “‘dressed’ by social conventions and systems of representation” (Entwistle, 2015: 7).

The second and third sections of this article consider two more poems in which gems and jewellery establish a link with Petrarchism and canonical love poetry, and simultaneously present a critical stance towards the discourses of power implied in their ways of looking and voicing desire. I deal with Duffy’s critique of the blazon and its “petrification” of the female body in “Beautiful” (from the 2002 collection *Feminine Gospels*), and finally I address the culmination of Duffy’s engagement with the love poem in *Rapture*, her 2005 collection that was awarded the T. S. Eliot Prize. The final example, “Hour”, is a sonnet that plays on the equivalence time-money and subverts this clichéd vocabulary of value, gold, and jewels in order to express uncontainable passion through this closed, traditional form. Duffy’s poems, as indicated by the title of her anthology *Out of Fashion* (to which I shall return later),

are not merely concerned with garments and clothed or adorned bodies, but with *fashion*, if we keep in mind Thuy Linh Tu's distinction: clothing is transformed into fashion when it is "[turned] into a cultural object, one whose meaning is understood to be produced and circulated primarily through consumption and display" (2014: 105).

My argument aims to go beyond simply interpreting Duffy's poetry as a resisting response to common themes and motifs in love poetry. Instead, I argue that her poetics are concerned with a revision of the love poem, a rewiring of its circuits of desire, and this necessarily implies an engagement with Petrarchan influence, given its prominence as a master discourse in the Western lyric, and with the sonnet. By Petrarchism, I refer to a mode that became the dominant paradigm of amatory lyrics in Renaissance Europe; its foundational texts are the *Rime Sparse* of Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch) (1304-1374), and its influence continues to the present day. Edward Hirsch lists the following *topoi* as characteristic of Petrarchism: "unrequited love; the lover addicted to love even though he is burning in his own passion, in an icy fire; love as pain; love as a passion beyond the will; love as an invisible chain; the lover eternally faithful to his idealized lady" (2014: 456-457). The use of blazons, oxymoron and antithesis is also typical. Beyond these formal and thematic conventions, another important issue is the kind of male subjectivity that is constructed particularly in Petrarchan sonnets: a self-reflective lyric I that oscillates between agency and impotency, control and submission, and that, according to critics like Nancy J. Vickers (1981: 277-279), overcomes these contradictions and affirms himself as a unitary voice at the expense of a fragmented female object of desire. The Petrarchan lover defines himself through his desire and his eloquence, which defies the "unspeakable" nature of love. Understanding Petrarchism as a mode, and not as a subgenre of love sonnets, for example, allows me to identify Petrarchan elements in poems that do not conform to an established or closed form. Finally, Petrarchism, as Mary Moore has claimed, can be understood as a technology of gender (2000: 14), a vocabulary that has nourished cultural understandings of love and desire, of who voices admiration and who is admired and silent; it is a tradition that we have resorted to in order to rationalize the disruptive, extreme experience of love for the last eight centuries.

"Next to my own skin, her pearls"

Love poetry, explains Erik Gray, captures the contradiction between the lover's urge to speak and his/her impossibility of doing so (2018). Lovers' passion is rarely clamoured; instead, it is found in "whispers" and wordless actions that, paradoxically, can only be recalled or described through language. Amatory poetry frequently highlights how attempts to communicate the rapture of being in love clash against language's insufficiency:

As Terdiman says, “Love insists on representation; love blocks representation [...]. So love can’t speak and does speak”. The problem is intractable; it arises not so much from cultural conventions that may deem it inappropriate to declare one’s love as from a sense that words themselves are simply inappropriate to passion. Of all the paradoxes that characterize love poetry, this is the most basic: love both requires language and renounces it. Love poetry therefore succeeds by displaying its own failure. (Gray, 2018: 12)

Gray’s claim is useful for thinking about love as an excess that frustrates attempts at representation; however, it misses the fact that there are ideologies at work that establish ideal narratives of love and desire, while discouraging, rendering invisible, or even punishing those whose desire does not match this ideal. In “Warming Her Pearls”, the speaker, a lady’s maid, is indeed forbidden to voice her desire due to class hierarchies and narratives of compulsory heterosexuality. A pearl necklace serves as the symbol of her concealed longing; it is a piece of jewellery that she is allowed to wear, but does not own, it is the mistress who ultimately wears the necklace as a sign of social status and power. Rebecca Ross Russell contends that one of the functions of jewellery is “to situate the wearer in society, alternatively broadening and limiting the social options available” (2010: 5). In Duffy’s poem, the lady seems confined in a passive role where how she is judged depends on always looking beautiful and being fashionably dressed, but the necklace attests to her wealth and status. For the speaker, the pearls, an emblem of perfection, rarity, and concealment, convey a sense of entrapment and longing:

Next to my own skin, her pearls. My mistress
bids me wear them, warm them, until evening
when I’ll brush her hair. At six, I place them
round her cool, white throat. All day I think of her

resting in the Yellow Room, contemplating silk
or taffeta, which gown tonight? She fans herself
whilst I work willingly, my slow heat entering
each pearl. Slack on my neck, her rope. (Duffy, 2015: 119)

The pearl necklace condenses meanings related to class, gender, and sexuality, and it also gestures to the inherited codes of love poetry: pearls, in the Petrarchan tradition, often appear as metaphors for a woman’s teeth or tears. As I suggested before, Duffy links the poem with the canonical discourse of love through the depiction of the lady as a distant being whose indifference causes the speaker’s pain; however, her emphasis on class, along with her focus on a working-class woman as

the desiring subject, contradicts the traditional scheme that typically conceives of women only as objects of desire. The recontextualization of these tropes in a dramatic monologue instead of a sonnet reveals a connection between the modes of enunciation of both genres. The speaker of a dramatic monologue is not entirely different from that of a typical Petrarchan sonnet since the lover's discourse in a sonnet tends to be mediated too: the sonneteer creates a persona who plays the part of "the poet" or "the lover". As the form of the dramatic monologue has been appealing to poets interested in exploring the cultural construction of gender, the multi-layered, contradictory persona of Petrarchan sonnets can be adapted and potentially be used for expressing women's desire, according to Moore: "The very complexities of Petrarch's subject position —vacillating between experiences of agency and loss of potency, unity and fragmentation, knowledge and error— may also have enhanced the mode's appeal or accessibility to early modern women because they must have experienced their own subjectivity as always complicated by their relative lack of legal and political power" (2000: 11). Moore also points to the opening line of Petrarch's first sonnet in *Rime Sparse*: it begins with the apostrophe "Voi ch'ascoltate", "You who hear"; "this self-display and sensitivity to audience reveal the dramatic nature of Petrarch's discourse; by pointing to audience, Petrarch points to his speaker's role as performer, as actor, a role that helps distinguish the poems from autobiography" (Moore, 2000: 34). This last remark is relevant today, given that the literary production of women still has to confront prejudices that demerit the writer's creativity by labelling the work as autobiographical.

The legacy of Petrarchan sonnets also throws light on the exploration of love as a relation of subjugation; as Diana Henderson notes, "the sonnet form originated in an age when poets were also political 'subjects' to princes, when emotions were perceived as external forces pressuring internal spirits and when earthly experience was deemed subject to heavenly will; the sonnet allowed poets a fourteen-line space in which they could at least articulate, if not exert, their own wills" (2011: 46). These images of captivity and subjugation are evident in the poem's depiction of the maid wearing the necklace: "Slack on my neck, her rope". Jewellery, according to Russell, is "inescapably political, its meaning bound to the possibilities of the body it lies on" (2010: 1). The necklace does not unite the two women, nor does it simply praise or enhance the lady's beauty; it represents the power that the lady has over the speaker. It captures the speaker's dual subordination, being both a lady's maid and a lovesick woman trapped by gender norms and social hierarchies. The maid never speaks directly to the lady: her desire is "unspeakable" and can only be communicated nonverbally, invisibly, through a "slow heat" and a "scent" that are carried in the pearls (Duffy, 2015: 119-120). Her passion resists being expressed: looking at their reflection on the lady's mirror, the maid remarks: "my red lips part as though I want to speak". Since this failed attempt to communicate happens when they are both in front of

a mirror, when the lady is getting ready to go out, this can indicate that the mirror does not show identification or union, but an impassable division.

“Warming Her Pearls” also prompts questions about how gender and sexuality have little basis on a “natural” body: according to Joanne Entwistle, it would be misguided to see clothing and ornaments as a straightforward expression of an already gendered body; instead, clothes and ornaments confer sexuality (2015: 181). Russell’s interpretation of jewellery is similar: “Gender in culture must be understood through the socialization that males and females undergo as part of developing an identity. Jewellery can be seen as such a method of socialization —not a result of innate difference between the sexes, but one of many methods used to inculcate difference, in status and in self-perception” (2010: 3). These remarks can be connected with Moore’s analysis, who argues that “the Petrarchan mode’s association with eroticism and its cross-historical appeal offer fertile ground for exploring gender in its cultural matrix” (2000: 7). Engaging with Petrarchism in a self-reflective manner has ideological implications, even if Duffy does not locate the events of the poem in a specific period of time: as Moore contends, “allusions to a genre’s or a mode’s conventions evoke ideological as well as literary values derived from the mode’s original historical context. Literary modes and conventions thus transmit ideologies, and the imitators of literary forms implicitly evoke, accept, confront, or revise ideology” (2000: 9).

The speaker observes the lady in fascination; the lady, meanwhile, only contemplates which gown she will wear on that night. Lamenting women’s “inconstancy” or ever-changing attitude is a frequent subject of canonical love poetry; as Entwistle notes, this stereotype sustains the cultural association of women and fashion, since the latter is also regarded as fleeting (2015: 148). Instead of emphasizing sight as the sense that dominates the speaker’s experience of enthrallment, the poem focuses on touch and scent and confronts warmth and coolness, reworking the Petrarchan antithesis of fire and ice: the speaker has to work, her “slow heat entering / each pearl”, while the lady fans herself. She imagines that her scent will be trapped in the gems and will remain with the lady as an unsettling note under her perfume. Being near the woman she desires, helping her to dress and brushing her hair, makes her unvoiced desire even more painful. At the end of the poem, the passionate speaker lies on her bed and concludes:

And I lie here awake,
knowing the pearls are cooling even now
in the room where my mistress sleeps. All night
I feel their absence and I burn. (Duffy, 2015: 120)

Nods to Petrarchan *topoi* are one of the means by which “Warming Her Pearls” positions itself as part of a tradition, and simultaneously as a critical response that diverges from that legacy. The second strategy for achieving this is through association with specific poems in which jewels also mediate the power dynamics between a man who observes and a woman who is observed. One of the texts that the poet possibly had in mind is “Les Bijoux” (“The Jewels”) by Charles Baudelaire; in this poem, a woman’s jewels are related to her servitude and are also the cause of the male observer’s enthrallment and rapture. The female body in “Les Bijoux” is completely dependent on the male gaze. In “Warming Her Pearls”, as we have seen, the relationship between the speaker and the lady is asymmetrical, but for very different reasons than those that can be identified in a poem like Baudelaire’s, or in John Donne’s “To His Mistress Going to Bed”, a poem whose kinship to “Warming Her Pearls” has been made explicit by Duffy. Both appear in the anthology *Out of Fashion*, a collection of poems about fashion, clothing, and jewellery. Fifty contemporary poets were invited by Duffy, who served as the editor, to choose a poem of their own that dealt with these subjects, as well as another poem by some other author. Duffy’s contributions are her own “Warming Her Pearls”, the first poem in the book, and “To His Mistress Going to Bed”, the last poem in the anthology. We are thus invited to compare and contrast these two texts. The power dynamics in “Warming Her Pearls” are contrary to the way in which “To His Mistress Going to Bed” affirms a heterosexual man’s right over a woman’s body: in the latter, as the speaker looks at the woman undressing before going to bed, he relates her body to gems and depicts her as a land to be conquered and exploited: “My Mine of precious stones, My Empirie, / How blest am I in this discovering thee!” (Donne, 2004: 158-159). This final gesture towards a canonical poem captures the ambivalence of “Warming Her Pearls” towards the ways in which gems have adorned, sexualized, and objectified female bodies.

“Divinely fair, a pearl, drop-dead / gorgeous”

Jewellery, as we have seen, can evoke power and rank, but also compliance with gender norms when the ornamented female body is displayed as “something to be looked at”,¹ thus reinforcing an unequal model (Russell, 2010: 4-5). Due to this stereotypical position, feminist theorists of visual culture have interpreted the mythical character Medusa as a transgressive woman who inverts this gendered scheme by silencing and petrifying anyone who attempts to look at her. I will return to Medusa later, but now I wish to focus on how metaphors of gems and precious metals have been interpreted as acts of rhetorical and representational violence

¹ Russell borrows the term “to-be-looked-at-ness” from Laura Mulvey’s classic essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975).

against women's bodies. I am concerned particularly with Duffy's adoption and transformation of the blazon, a mode of describing a person's physical features by comparing them to beautiful or valuable objects. Scholars like Nancy J. Vickers and Moira P. Baker have associated the blazon to "a tradition of poetry in which men, from the conventions of courtly love onwards, had assumed responsibility for cataloguing—and thereby objectifying— female body parts" (Gill, 2007: 88).

"Beautiful", published in 2002 in *Feminine Gospels*, is a long poem divided into four sections, each one dealing with the life and myth of a famous beautiful woman. Although they are never named, the four women can be identified as Helen of Troy, Queen Cleopatra, Marilyn Monroe, and Diana, Princess of Wales. This identification (in both senses of the word: naming and feeling interpellated by similarity) is possible, according to Dowson, because Duffy "weaves in signifiers to make them recognizable while the contemporary idioms conflate ancient with modern times" (2016: 146). "Beautiful" offers an exploration of how beauty oppressed these women, who were desired, admired and pursued, but also harassed, haunted, and even destroyed because of their otherworldly beauty. By writing about the four beautiful women both as legendary beings and as if they were contemporary celebrities, "Duffy strips away any glamour from beauty and any sense that these women were blessed by their looks to reveal how they were objectified, imprisoned, and killed by voyeurism" (Dowson, 2016: 147). There is a concern for how fame and beauty lead celebrities to become targets of an objectifying, disciplinary gaze: this is vividly conveyed by rhyming "stare" with "star" (Duffy, 2015: 315).

Images of jewels appear throughout Duffy's poem: when Helen leaves her husband, "the small coin of her wedding ring / [was] left on the bedside table like a tip" (Duffy, 2015: 310), while everything that surrounds Cleopatra speaks of luxury—the "golden barge" in which she sails to meet Caesar, her lavish table full of figs, grapes and honey, and the "turquoise" of her eye makeup (Duffy, 2015: 312-313). Though this event is not mentioned in the poem, classic sources tell of how Cleopatra allegedly drank a pearl dissolved in vinegar. The film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) and the famous scene in which Marilyn Monroe's character sings "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend" have created a strong association between the actor and jewellery; for this reason, I will focus on the section of the poem dedicated to Monroe's portrayal in popular culture. These lines articulate a clear critique of the blazon, and by extension of an objectifying, mastering gaze. From the perspective of a poet born in the mid-twentieth century, these long-existing codes, inherited from courtly love poetry, acquire a new layer of meaning when examined in relation to contemporary celebrity culture. Monroe is introduced in the following lines:

The camera loved her, close-up, back-lit,
adored the waxy pouting of her mouth,

her sleepy, startled gaze. She breathed
 the script out in her little voice. They filmed her
 famous, filmed her beautiful. Guys fell
 in love, dames copied her. (Duffy, 2015: 314)

Feminist artists and theorists have identified the writer's pen, the painter's brush or the sculptor's chisel as the tool that embodies the violence done to women's bodies through representation. In "Beautiful", this violence is represented by the filming camera that, while transforming Monroe into a star, also petrifies, silences, and feeds on her:

They filmed her harder, harder, till her hair
 was platinum, her teeth gems, her eyes
 sapphires pressed by a banker's thumb.
 She sang to camera one, gushed
 at the greased-up lens, her skin investors' gold,
 her fingernails mother-of-pearl, her voice
 champagne to sip from her lips.
 [...]
 They filmed on, deep, dumped what they couldn't use
 on the cutting-room floor, filmed more, quiet please,
 action, cut, quiet please, action, cut, quiet please,
 action, cut, till she couldn't die when she died,
 couldn't get older, ill, couldn't stop saying the lines
 or singing the tunes. (Duffy, 2015: 314-15)

Gold, blonde hair, gems, sapphires, stars: all of these are frequent elements of the Renaissance blazon, a form in which "we find the female body carefully laid bare for male scrutiny and celebration" (Gill, 2007: 88). Unlike the model in "Standing Female Nude", who speaks back and escapes the control of the artist, in "Beautiful" Monroe is commodified and represented as a sexualized object; this mastering gaze can be linked to the blazon and its neutralization and disempowerment of the female gaze. The verb "to cut", that in Duffy's poem describes aggressive directing and editing, also evokes the segmentation and scattering of women's bodies that Vickers (1981, 1985) and Baker (1991) have found in this poetic form.

The word blazon comes from a French word that means "shield", and like Perseus avoiding the deadly gaze of Medusa and later decapitating her, the rhetorical dissection of a woman's body prevents her from returning the poet's gaze (Vickers, 1985: 182). Besides its heraldic usage, the word *blason* "is related to and reacts upon the earlier English verb 'to blaze,' 'to proclaim as with a trumpet, to publish, to divulge, to make known; and, by extension, to defame or celebrate, to depict, to portray'"

(Vickers, 1985: 175). After analysing a sonnet by Philip Sidney in which the shield of Cupid, adorned with the face of the speaker's beloved Stella, triumphs over the arms of the other gods, Baker remarks that "the celebratory conceit inscribes the female body between rivals; her face is the shield that both protects the poet and is the battlefield on which he struggles for poetic supremacy and domination of the feminine" (1991: 11). Baker thus interprets the blazon both as a shield and a mirror, on which "the adored female body [...] broken into brightly polished fragments reflects back to the speaker his own act of self-creation" (1991: 10). When the female body is simply treated, in Vickers' words, as "matter for male oratory", (1985: 172), metaphors of gems and precious metals speak of the creation of an immortal object that drains the life from the real woman: the phrase "drop-dead gorgeous", in the opening lines of "Beautiful", acquires an inauspicious, tragic quality. Unlike the speakers of the Renaissance love poems studied by Vickers and Baker, the speaker in "Beautiful" is an external third-person narrator of the women's lives; the poem considers their effect on other people, and how their beauty relates to their disempowerment. This stance differs significantly from fashioning oneself by seeing one's own desire reflected on a fragmented woman.

"...the Midas light / turning your limbs to gold"

My final example of Duffy's engagement with canonical representations of women and gems is, fittingly, a sonnet, a very traditional lyric form if ever there was one. "Hour" is part of her 2005 collection *Rapture*. The book is a sequence of sonnets and sonnet-like lyrics in which a female speaker narrates the development and eventual end of a love affair. As the title of the collection prefigures, the poems often deal with rapturous, ecstatic feelings and depict love as an all-encompassing, disruptive force. However, the speech of the lover does not exploit the beloved's image; given that describing can be interpreted as an attempt to possess, the speaker simply names them.² Memory attests to the opacity of representation; in "Rain", for example, the speaker says: "I burned for you day and night; / got bits of your body wrong, bits of it right" (Duffy, 2015: 377). This writing affected by rapture, by an excess that resists being captured in language, often exists in sharp contrast with a meticulous control over poetic forms. "Hour", the seventh poem in the sequence, depicts the speaker's infatuation at an early moment in the relationship.

Besides the sonnet, the canonical form that "Hour" can be related to is the aubade or alba, a type of love poem that, like the blazon, originates in courtly poetry. In an aubade, one or both lovers lament the coming of dawn and their imminent separation

² I use the pronouns they/them to refer to the addressee of the poems in *Rapture*: the text does posit a female speaker, but only uses the second-person singular to refer to the beloved, avoiding a clear statement of the beloved's gender.

(Galvez, 2012: 29). Galvez notes the adulterous love as a consistent feature; it is unclear if this is the case in “Hour”, but the poem suggests that the lovers are meeting in secret and seldom manage to “steal” an hour for themselves. The sonnet builds on the clichéd saying “time equals money” to convey a sense of fortune: as if crafting a conceit³ in the manner of Renaissance lyrics, the poem imagines love pleading for only an hour, grateful for receiving just a coin:

Love’s times’ beggar, but even a single hour,
bright as a dropped coin, makes love rich.
We find an hour together, spend it not on flowers
or wine, but the whole of the summer sky and a grass ditch.
(Duffy, 2015: 374)

The emphasis on the full enjoyment of a brief period of time can be tied to the theme of *carpe diem*, common in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century poetry. The rejection of traditional symbols of romantic love echoes a previous poem by Duffy, “Valentine”, in which the speaker gifts her lover “Not a red rose or a satin heart”, but an onion, and adds that “Its platinum loops shrink to a wedding ring, / if you like” (Duffy, 2015: 207-208). Lying next to her lover on the grass, the speaker in “Hour” compares their hair to a “treasure on the ground”; the lover’s body is turned into gold by “the Midas light”. The joy of being together is their wealth, “for here / we are millionaires”; they hope to stop the passing of time “so nothing dark will end our shining hour” (Duffy, 2015: 374-375). As in an aubade, time is the lovers’ antagonist; however, in Duffy’s sonnet, the lovers do not yearn for a never-ending night. Instead, the poem speaks of “backhanding the night” in order to prolong a sunlit moment and drive the darkness away. The complicity of nature is a frequent feature in *Rapture*, and this strengthens the connections between “Hour” and the aubade —Galvez notes that in this genre a watchman may appear as a third voice that intervenes to “announce the coming of dawn and the need for the lovers to separate” (2012: 29).

The speaker praises her lover’s beauty by using similes that hint at the insufficiency of figurative language and artifice: no jewels can compare to the minute insect “hung from the blade of grass at your ear” (Duffy, 2015: 375); the light of chandeliers or spotlights could not be more flattering. The sonnet ends with a reference to “Rumpelstiltskin”, a fairy tale in which a woman has to give away her necklace, then her ring, and is eventually forced to promise her firstborn child as payment to the magical being who has helped her spin straw into gold:

³ Christopher Johnson defines a conceit as “a figure of thought, typical of baroque and metaphysical poetry and prose, which ingeniously compares dissimilar things and ideas, cultivating thereby surprise, followed, ideally, by admiration and insight” (2012: 289).

Time hates love, wants love poor,
But love spins gold, gold, gold from straw. (Duffy, 2015: 375)

The epizeuxis in the final line —“gold, gold, gold”— evokes the expansive movement and the yearning for a never-ending hour, while “straw” references the grass on which the lovers lie together. However, acknowledging that the grass has turned into hay or straw is a powerful reminder of the passing of time and the lovers’ mortality (this image appears in Shakespeare’s Sonnet 12, for example).⁴ How are we to interpret, after three quatrains that follow the usual rhyme scheme of the Shakespearean sonnet, this non-rhyming couplet? Is the “Midas light” a less obvious mechanism of objectification? In her poem “Mrs Midas”, Duffy had imagined the grief and anger of the mythical king’s wife, who could not be touched by her husband again without becoming a gold statue (Duffy, 2015: 237-239). On the other hand, the beloved’s body might be simply embellished by the sun’s glow, a light that never remains static; this would point to the speaker’s lack of control and her acceptance of the impossibility to represent the beloved. The body in *Rapture*, and particularly this body adorned by metaphorical gold, is “notoriously difficult to theorize or pin down, because it is mutable, in perpetual flux, different from day to day and resistant to conceptual definition” (Hillman and Maude, 2015: 1). Without offering a single, definite answer to the questions listed above, Duffy’s revision of the aubade and the sonnet allows for the entrance of what resists description or characterization into these highly structured forms.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of three texts, I have explored Carol Ann Duffy’s sustained interest in poems that “examine, in their different ways, how we dress or undress, how we cover up or reveal, and how clothes, fashion and jewellery are both a necessary and luxurious, a practical and sensual, a liberating and repressing part of our lives” (Duffy, 2004: xi). In these three examples, pearls, gems, jewellery and gold link Duffy’s work to canonical love poetry, while simultaneously articulating a critical response to the power asymmetries of the lyric mode. Playing both the part of Medusa (the terrifying woman who resists being treated as an object to be looked at) and of Perseus, Duffy holds a shield/mirror to the tradition she inherits, to evidence its biases and injustices, and at the same time to dress this literary history in new clothes, highlighting artifice and combining familiar codes with disruptive bodies and desires.

⁴ “And [when I behold] summer’s green all girded up in sheaves, / Borne on the bier with white and bristly beard: / Then of thy beauty do I question make / That thou among the wastes of time must go” (Shakespeare, 2010: 135).

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