

Universität Bayreuth
Englische Literaturwissenschaft
Proseminar “Carol Ann Duffy”
Shirin Assa, MA.
WS 19/20

“I hold him in the casket of my widow’s head”
A Poetry Analysis Essay on Carol Ann Duffy’s “Anne Hathaway”

by Benedikt Wittenberg

Introduction	2
Meaning and Message	3
Poetic and Rhetoric Form and their Contribution to the Theme	3
Conclusion.....	10
List of Works Cited	12

Introduction

Which words would a “lesbian feminist” (Yorke 85) writer give to a persona that mourns her heterosexual male lover’s death?

Carol Ann Duffy’s sonnet-like “Anne Hathaway” was first published by Picador in 1999 as part of *The World’s Wife*, a concept collection of poems by Duffy that also features “Mrs Lazarus”. Mrs Lazarus lived through it all:

I had grieved. I wept for a night and a day
Over my loss, ripped the cloth I was married in
From my breast, howled, shrieked, clawed
At the burial stones till my hands bled, retched
His name over and over again, dead, dead. (Duffy, “Mrs Lazarus” ll. 1-5)

It unites the two poems to stage women who lost their husbands. But while the speaker in “Mrs Lazarus” recapitulates the whole process of her mourning — from raging grief (Duffy, “Mrs Lazarus” lines 1-5) to healing (Duffy, “Mrs Lazarus” 6-29) and, in the end, a tearing of mended wounds (Duffy, “Mrs Lazarus” 30-40) — on the first look, the persona of “Anne Hathaway” from the beginning onwards seems much steadier. This persona, following the title and the concept of *The World’s Wife*, can clearly be identified as Anne Hathaway herself. In the poem that could as well be a love letter, she narrates about her emotional and physical relationship to her deceased husband, i.e. William Shakespeare. This equally romantic and tragic poem is preceded by an excerpt from Shakespeare’s will. In this, he — seemingly unromantically — grants his wife his “second best bed” (Duffy, “Hathaway” line i), a key element for this purpose is the marriage bed. In this essay, I take a closer look at “Anne Hathaway” and elaborate on the thesis that this poem defends a strong woman’s love to her equally loving partner by using various metaphors and especially the image and the domain of the bed to present the couple’s intimacy as opposed to other’s expectations and behaviour.

Meaning and Message

On the surface, the speaker of the poem browses through her memories of her lover, of whom it is implicated that he had deceased lately (Duffy, “Hathaway” 13-14). This sets the poem’s preface (Duffy, “Hathaway” i-ii) into context. The speaker captures her remembrances of their shared bed (Duffy, “Hathaway” 1-3), her partner’s words (Duffy, “Hathaway” 3-5), their bodies and her partner’s touch (Duffy, “Hathaway” 5-7) in multiple images. Further, she gives a more general image of their relationship to each other and to their marriage bed in lines 8 to 10 before contrasting all that was said so far with the activities of the couple’s guest. In the last two lines, lines 13 and 14, the speaker promises to keep the memory of her lover dearly.

But it would do this poem uttermost injustice to read it solely on the surface. It is rich in its imagery and symbolism and thus, the more you sharpen your eye and your imagination, or rather the more Duffy through the poem sharpens your eye and your imagination, the deeper you sink into the poem’s net of allusions, metaphors, and hints beyond itself. Then it reveals its underlying message as the speaker wraps imagery’s colourful bands around the invisible, trying to present the love between Anne and William in order to defend it against all who cannot or do not want to imagine happiness in a relationship so imbalanced fame-wise. But there is also a sombre, dark note to this poem as the excerpt from Shakespeare’s will (Duffy, “Hathaway” i-ii) and the last two lines as a sort of epigram express this love’s bitter twist as Anne has to mourn her late husband’s death. Through this multitude of emotions, Duffy ultimately provides her readership with a poem that functions as a “a gentle vindication of the love between the famously neglected wife of the most famous writer in history” (Winterson xiii) by presenting a woman that shows posture and grandeur in her intimacy.

Poetic and Rhetoric Form and their Contribution to the Theme

This intimacy is presented by the speaker in a highly poetical language. The very first two lines already confront the reader with a rich metaphor: The marriage bed is equalled with a fantastical world of “forests, castles, torchlight, clifftops, seas” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 2). This image of the world conveys a sense of completeness, of closedness. In a world – reading ‘world’ as a symbol for all-encompassing unity – everything possible is contained and balanced, especially referring to poetical worlds

as only in this scenario one may speak of “a [...] world” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 1) instead of *the* world. The world is even modified, it is a “spinning world” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 1), dancing, chaotic, passionately tumbling. And if the bed equalled a world, is it not a scenery where all of life’s shades are to be found if “[a]ll the world’s a stage” (Shakespeare, “As You Like It” 2.7.138)? Notice how Duffy manages to address the majority of the poem’s topics, namely the bed, life in its broadness and physical and emotional love, in the opening line alone. But the world is specified by the asyndetons in the second line. First and foremost, it creates an air of fantasy and mystery, a landscape as straight from a fairy tale. Thus, Anne lauds her husband’s power to create and narrate. Secondly, it may refer to the various shapes churned blankets and pillows can take and thereby add to the poem’s degree of visuality. And thirdly, one may read the recital of nouns as metaphor for sexual intercourse, here especially the love-making of Anne and William: the “forest” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 2) as a symbol for darkness, the wild, the mysterious, but also for pubic hair; “castles” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 2) – protected, treasured places of beauty and gorgeousness amidst the woods – possibly representing a vagina or a penis; “torchlight” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 2) as enlightening and enabling to see, understand, one another with its connotations of fire, of warmth, of passion; leading towards “clifftops” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 2), highest point, climax, orgasm – and then the sudden drop, calmness and exhaustion as the energy ceases, the verb *cease* even homophonic with the image of “seas” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 2).

At the same time, those seas are erotically recharged in the next line when following the pearl as an image for breasts or the clitoris, as it were those seas where the lover “would dive for pearls” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 3). But as so often in Duffy’s oeuvre, this metaphor is hardly unilateral. The pearls that the lover, i.e. William Shakespeare, reaches for may also refer to poetic highlights, *heureka*s found in his relationship with his muse Anne. This reflects the duality of Shakespeare’s role as presented by the speaker of the poem – the famous writer Shakespeare with his works and his fame, next to whom Anne surely often remained unnoticed, and William, Anne’s husband and “living laughing love” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 12).

This theme is carried into the next sentence, stretching from line 3 to line 5. The persona’s “lover’s words”, namely his plays and sonnets, surely were “shooting stars” (l. 4), considering their lasting popularity, but more importantly, he seemed to find

tender, loving words for his love, brightly shining and wonderful like meteors. But “words [are] made of breath” (Shakespeare, “Hamlet” 3.4.190), they are airy and may touch the heart, but are otherwise intangible – until they “[fall] to earth as kisses/ on these lips” (ll. 4-5). This connection of emotionally and physically perceivable love created by this section seems to characterize the underlying relationship between Anne and William.

The next lines highlight this physicality: The speaker’s body is set into spatial, dynamic relation to her lover’s body via metapoetical imagery: “[Anne’s] body now a softer rhyme/ to his, now echo, assonance” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 5-6). The mentioned poetic devices name the similarity and identity of words, syllables and vowels. In this metaphor, they are vehicles for the movements of the couple’s bodies during their love-making, moving with, against or delayed to another. Notice the relation to terminologies like *masculine/ feminine rhyme*. Again, poetry, word, passion and body are combined. Their intimacy is also expressed in the following image that equals the lover’s touch with “a verb dancing in the centre of a noun” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 7). Verbs describe actions, they are full of energy and life, while nouns describe states, entities, the static. Just like the idiomatically felt butterflies, the touch brings sensations, fluttering energy to the speaker’s stomach or possibly her genitals – both in the “centre” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 7) of her body – and maybe his touch was indeed also a verb, a ‘Touch!’ pleading for a reply.

From this physical passion, the poem then turns to different remembrances. The persona reports that she sometimes “dreamed he’d written [her]” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 8), emphasising this idea by comparing the bed she slept in to “a page beneath his writer’s hands” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 9). Being written by her husband, one of the most ingenious and famous writers of all time, may imply a magical, enchanted view of herself and of the world – comparable to the fantastical setting of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, which is most subtly alluded to phonetically in the passage “*Some nights I dreamed*” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 8, my emphasis) – but it may also imply the lover’s dominance and power over Anne, brought forth by patriarchal traditions and fame. This dominance may be represented in the supressing image of being “beneath his [...] hands” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 9). Operating the hand as a metaphor for power, these lines in the middle third of the poem may be the only subtle

concession that Anne makes to public and historical voices that deprive her of a relevant role at the Bard's side; these lines exalt her credibility and the roundness of her character as she admits the downsides of her relationship through which she maybe often found herself in the spot-shadows of spotlights on her husband. The comparison of the bed – with its bed sheets – to a page, a sheet of paper (Duffy, “Hathaway” 8-9) can tell multiple stories: a blank page, white linen, may represent virtue and a state of *unwritten-ness*. But this seems unlikely when calling to mind the passion earlier in the poem and additionally, the “writer's hands” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 9) surely would already have written something. And indeed, Shakespeare seems to have filled their marital bed with fantastical stories and miracles (Duffy, “Hathaway” 1-3). This opens another understanding of the image: Being written neither as unreal escapism nor as an impotence-dominance relation, but underlining the private, inmost connection writers have to their works. For each line inked there are thoughtful hours spent, literature, poetry especially, as the condensation of a soul's inmost concerns. Thus, writers know more about their writing than anybody else, but also may the written know about and contain more of the writer than ever revealed. Transferred from the image to the interpersonal, such mutual understanding surely is important for a relationship and a sign of great trust. The tie between speaker and lover is characterized by this. One final level of meaning aims at the intersection of the intra- and the extrapoetical, the fictional and the historical: The “second best bed” (Duffy, “Hathaway” i), this “bed [they] loved in” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 1) that was given to Anne must have been a love letter if furniture ever was literature. If it was “a page” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 9), then one that must be filled with the most wonderful and suitable piece of writing in order to be a gift – or otherwise it would not have been given, would have been „scrunched up and tossed into the bin, as it is sometimes the fate of “a page beneath [...] writer[s'] hands” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 9). Duffy arranges her poem's speaker's utterances in enjambments so that line 8 alone states that William had “dreamed he'd written [her] [...] the bed” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 8, punctuation consciously altered), and thus expresses that Anne might have dreamt of him leaving behind a message, a part of the writing that always had been his life, the bed a farewell of wood and linen.

When in the next line the speaker uses the domain of metapoetry once more (Duffy, “Hathaway” 5-6), she does not borrow stylistic devices to express herself, but picks

genres. “Romance/ and drama” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 9-10) denote literary categories both of which William Shakespeare added to in abundance. Many of these plays were performed in the Globe Theatre, where groundlings would stand packed and the nobility sit elevated, where bodies touched and pushed against one another, the air filled with the smell of food and faeces, where actors and audience shouted, cried and laughed. Thus, watching joyful romantic comedies and dramatic tragedies, the audience with all senses experienced the all-encompassing range of life. And so did Anne. She and William had ups and downs, their relationship was weathered, they had experienced life in various shapes. When the persona of “Anne Hathaway” reveals that “[r]omance/ and drama, played by touch, by scent, by taste” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 9-10) describes their relationship, it could be rephrased as *We lived life together*.

In the next passage, the speaker’s focus moves from the couple’s intimacy to something outside of their relationship, to a diminutive “other” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 11-12). This distance is instantly created when shifting from the marital bed as the setting of elaborations to the explicitly “*other* bed, the best” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 11, my emphasis). Besides linguistical distancing, this answers the question that implicitly arises from the preface: If Shakespeare’s wife inherited the “second best bed” (Duffy, “Hathaway” i), what are the circumstances of the finest one? It is presented to be reserved for the house’s guests, but they are not only othered, as the phrase “our guests” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 11) creates two separate unities of the couple and the guests; their writing and, in a broader sense, their spirit is attacked. Firstly, by highlighting their use of the bed – sleeping – in comparison to the lively action of Shakespeare and Hathaway, as this entails boredom and a lack of energy; secondly, by the metaphor in the adverbial participle. The couple’s guests are indirectly characterised as authors as they produce “prose” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 12), but their creative processes are not labelled as normal writing but degraded as a mere “dribbling” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 12). The chosen verb presents the literary output as unfiltered and unreflected. The writers in the “other bed” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 11) filled their page (Duffy, “Hathaway” 8-9) not with art but with unconsciously spilled saliva. This contrasts Shakespeare with those authors by creating a hierarchy between his poetry and the inferiorly presented prose.

After this short and singular digression to topics and persons outside from their romantic relationship, the speaker, Anne Hathaway, returns to a multi-layered characterisation of her husband when evoking her “living laughing love” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 12). On the level of content, although, or rather, because William has passed away, in the last description and verbal depiction of him, she draws a vivid, likeable, confident image of her lover contrary to the poem’s setting *post mortem*. This is the starting point for what could be titled a verbal in-memorial-card constituted by the last two-and-a-half lines of “Anne Hathaway”. But also the phonological level transports this conscious, tender energy and lightness. The consonances found within the utterance – changing most notably from /ɪ/ to /ɑ:/ and /ʌ/, while additionally devoicing and re-voicing the labiodental fricative and dropping the *ing*-morpheme – and the three iambs – “my *living laughing love*” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 12, emphasis mine) – create a singing, dancing rhythm that seems to try to push away the actual sombreness of the occasion.

The speaker closes her poetic oration with a couplet that wraps up all her explications: “I hold him in the casket of my widow’s head/ as he held me upon that next best bed.” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 13-14). This final sentence is as dense with meaning as the rest of the poem. When the persona declares that “[she] holds him [...] as he held [her]” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 13-14), she reverses gendered role expectations and takes an equally potent stand next to her partner. This empowerment depicts and pays tribute to the factual circumstances of her outliving her husband and being confronted with finding and taking her place in society without him. Considering how intense and romantic their relationship has been presented throughout the poem, this most likely presents a heart-breaking truth to her. Her probably complex emotional situation after her lover’s death is thus expressed in a single word: The homonym “casket” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 13) spans the whole width of her emotions, labelling “[a] small box or chest for jewels, letters, *or other things of value*” (*OED*, emphasis mine) – a paraphrase that suits the image of the head as a casket (Duffy, “Hathaway” 13) as it holds memories of the deceased dear -while at the same time being a synonym for *urn* and *coffin*. Thus, the tension between remembrance and love on the one hand and mourning and grief on the other hand is expressed.

A key to an understanding of the poem's structure and its influence on the meaning of "Anne Hathaway" may be the last two lines. They form a couplet, rhyming "head" (Duffy, "Hathaway" 13) with "bed" (Duffy, "Hathaway" 14), which is extraordinary in this poem that otherwise lacks such pure examples of an end rhyme. It may further be discovered that they are presented in iambs – forming six feet in line 13 and a iambic pentameter in line 14. This observation is an analytical nexus for two different aspects of interpretation. Turning especially to the iambic character of the lines, a comparison to the couplets in iambic pentameters so typical for Shakespearean writing lies near. They can be found throughout Shakespeare's oeuvre: "The *time* is *out of joint*, O *cursed spite*! That *ever I was born to set it right*!" (Shakespeare, "Hamlet" 1.5.190-191, emphasis mine) shall serve as an example. But in "Anne Hathaway" the pentameter is only achieved in the last of the two lines. Like the way that the word "widow's" (Duffy, "Hathaway" 13) breaks the constant rhythm of "I *hold him in the casket of my [...] head* / as *he held me upon that next best bed*." (Duffy, "Hathaway" 13-14, emphasis mine), the beauty of the moment and the statement about love are painfully scrunched up as the reality of the lover's death breaks in.

But the iambic couplet is not only a feature of drama in the form of heroic pentameters as presented, it is also centrally characteristic for the English sonnet: "So *long as men can breathe or eyes can see*, / So *long lives this and this gives life to thee*." (Shakespeare, "Sonnet XVIII" lines 13-14, emphasis mine). And indeed, more formal similarities between "Anne Hathaway" and the English sonnet can be found. The latter consist of 14 lines, made up out of three quartets and one couplet that follow the rhyming scheme ABAB CDCD EFEF GG (Meyer 27). "Anne Hathaway", for comparison, also consists of 14 lines and has a rhyme scheme that could be described as ABA*B*DEFGHIJKGG. First, Duffy's poem consists of one stanza instead of four, so the external structure differs strikingly from the sonnet despite the shared number of lines. The rhyme scheme starts in a sonnet's manner, but already bending its rules in the first four lines until changing into an abolition of end rhyme, while still containing some internal half-rhymes ("world" (Duffy, "Hathaway" 1) – "words" (Duffy, "Hathaway" 3); "lips" (Duffy, "Hathaway" 5) – "his" (Duffy, "Hathaway" 6); "best" (Duffy, "Hathaway" 11) – "guests" (Duffy, "Hathaway" 11)). Only in the final two lines, a traditional end rhyme is picked up again.

A similar evolution is observable on the level of metre. In the beginning, the lines occur in a continuous iambic pentameter:

The *bed* we loved in was a *spinning world*
of *forests, castles, torchlight, clifftops, seas*
where *he* would *dive* for *pearls*. My lover's words
were *shooting stars* which *fell* to *earth* as *kisses*

(Duffy, “Hathaway” 1-4, emphasis mine)

Although the iambs run on in the enjambments until line 7 at the most when ultimately disrupted by the trochees of “*dancing in the centre*” (Duffy, “Hathaway” 7), Duffy’s choice of verse division ends similarities with the sonnet’s metre already in line 4, where an additional syllable disturbs the uniformity of the iambic pentameters. Only in the last two lines, as mentioned, the pentameter is largely restored.

As shown, the metre and the rhyme scheme equally start like a sonnet would do, break the latter’s corset after some lines while returning to a modified version of a sonnet’s ending. This creates an image of a speaker trying to maintain posture but breaking into swooning over her lover and expressing her love and memories by almost prosing, and regaining posture for the last two solemn lines. The sonnet, a form of poetry traditionally marked as male, so on the one hand, the use of this masculine form of expression gives the implicitly female speaker power and gravity, supporting a widow’s voice in a patriarchal Renaissance society. She also honours her husband’s work by borrowing his tools. But on the other hand, she adapts the form to her needs, and thus expectations towards the sonnet are subverted, empowering female writing while still valuing the male position.

Conclusion

This duality is indeed central to “Anne Hathaway”. Duffy’s persona seems to speak to an implicated audience of dribbling, dozing guests (Duffy, “Hathaway” 11-12) that either pity Anne for standing neglected in Shakespeare’s vast shadow or neglect her themselves. They are fronted by a woman who defends her deep love against all odds and doubts by granting them a glimpse into her most intimate emotions and memories and thus gains ennobling grandeur, which makes her grief even more tragic. When Linda Bamber attests Shakespeare’s plays the presentation of “[c]omic women [and] tragic men” (Bamber 1), Duffy presents an empowered, tragic Anne who shows posture as a widow, as a wife, as a woman. The speaker openly admits her love and

her loss and by this celebrates the lover as well as love itself. “For those, who fear that feminism doesn’t include men, except at the level of anger and contempt, read this one[, i.e. ‘Anne Hathaway’]”, as Jeanette Winterson puts it (xiii). Which words would a “lesbian feminist” (Yorke 85) writer give to a persona that mourns her heterosexual male lover’s death? Words that praise love in ungendered imagery, words that empower women as they concede the right to mourn. This poem shows not only a strong woman’s love, but a loving woman’s strength as well.

List of Works Cited

- Bamber, Linda. *Comic Women, Tragic Men: A Study of Gender and Genre in Shakespeare*. Stanford UP, 1982.
- Duffy, Carol Ann. “Anne Hathaway.” *The World’s Wife*, edited by Carol Ann Duffy, Picador Classic, 2015, p. 30.
- . “Mrs Lazarus.” *The World’s Wife*, edited by Carol Ann Duffy, Picador Classic, 2015, pp. 49-50.
- “casket, n.” *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, 2020, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/28451?rskey=O5vscM&result=1#eid>. Accessed 19 April, 2020.
- Meyer, Michael. *English and American Literatures*. Narr Francke Attempto Verlag, 2011.
- Shakespeare, William. “As You Like It.” *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, edited by Jeremy Hylton. <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/asyoulikeit/full.html>, accessed March 26, 2020.
- . “Hamlet.” *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, edited by Jeremy Hylton. <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/hamlet/full.html>, accessed March 27, 2020.
- . “Sonnet XVIII.” *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, edited by Jeremy Hylton. <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/Poetry/sonnet.XVIII.html>, accessed April 9, 2020.
- Winterson, Jeanette. “Introduction.” *The World’s Wife*, edited by Carol Ann Duffy, Picador Classic, 2015, p. vii-xiv.
- Yorke, Liz. “British Lesbian Poetics: A Brief Exploration.” *Feminist Review* Summer 1999, pp. 78-90.